MALICIOUS
Non-Vampire Series Finale
JENNIE TAYLOR

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This is, as always, dedicated
to Maggie. Everything I do,
everything I want in life,
begins and ends with you,
my Maggie. Thank you for
sharing your life with me.

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A very quick review of what happened that led us to this point in the story:

15 Year-old vampire (totally NOT a vampire!) Brynne and her best friend Jessica Sloan were recruited to help the Venator Inmortuorum. The Venator Inmortuorum (aka The VI) was a group whose purpose was to hunt down and destroy monsters of all kinds, but it became corrupted. The VI agent working with them, Celeste Marcus, watched as her father was savagely murdered by a group being led by the very vampire who changed Brynne more than a century ago. Brynne killed him, but his two underlings escaped and vowed revenge. They started by killing Jessica's parents. They then sent a threatening text to Brynne regarding her former girlfriend, Teresa, prompting Brynne and friends to rush to Georgia to protect Teresa.

And that is how we got here.

Friday, July 25

Across the field there is movement. Curtains. My ex-girlfriend Teresa rustles them as she peeks out and glances up at the sky, watching as the last of the sunlight fades away. There is a brilliant wash of pinks and oranges along the horizon, yet it is almost completely dark now.

I cock my head to the side, listening to a sound nearby that caught my attention. I eye my escape routes quickly, then hold my breath as I turn. Jessica slips alongside me, behind the bush where I am hidden.

“How goes it?” she asks.
“Your shift doesn’t begin for almost four hours.” I reply, sagging back.
“Celeste needs you back at home. She heard some news from Barry.”
“What news?” I ask.
“She has all the details, Brynne, don’t ask me.” she says, shrugging.
“It will just have to wait, I have to–”
“I’ll watch your girly girl for a while, just scoot.”
“That’s okay, I’ll talk to her later.”
“Don’t make me tickle you.” she threatens.
“Okay, okay. I’m going.” I say, actually managing a smile. She knew that would get me.

I trust Jess to keep Teresa safe and I make my way back to the empty warehouse we are using as a home and base of operations. It is just over three miles from Teresa’s house, so it only takes a short time to run there.

“Hey,” I say, stepping up behind Barney, who is at the bank of computers that are set up along the wall.
“Holy hell, Brynne!” Barney exclaims, then catches his chair from rolling out from under him. “Damn,” He sighs and scoots the chair back to the desk. “Don’t do that.”
“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Jess says Celeste had something?”
“Yeah, yeah,” he says. “Yes.” He punches at the keyboard. “Celeste,” he shouts, “Move your ass, you’re up to bat.”
“Hi sweetie,” Celeste says, making her way down the stairs with a

smile on her face. It's nice to see her able to do that without wincing, as she did the first two or three weeks after her cheek bone was broken. "We got a call in from Barry."

Barry. That's her one contact with the Venator Inmortuorum who she still trusts not to hunt us all down and kill us. Or to tell Marissa and Miranda our location. Personally, I'm not so sure. Every instinct in me says to run away. I mean hey, it has worked for over a century, so why not now?

Because they have to be brought to justice, and we're the only ones who can do it.

I clear my throat and try to overcome the nausea I feel in the pit of my stomach. This isn't going to end well. He's going to turn on us in the end, I know it.

"Did he have any information?" I ask. Duh, why else would he be calling? I just don't know if I trust any information he may give us.
"Yes, he did." she confirms. "He has received a tip about a murder scene in Bradenborough Pass in Alaska."
"There must be a lot of murders in Alaska." Barney says. "Hell, it's Alaska after all. But this one was different."
"How was it different?" I ask, leaning back against the edge of the desk.
"Most killers don't sign their murder scene in blood."
"Was it Marissa or Miranda who signed it?" I ask, because it is the only reason we'd be discussing this.
"It wasn't either of the Satan Sisters." he says.
"Who–"
"The scene was signed 'Brynne'" Celeste tells me.

Wait, what? Did she just say… she just said Brynne! Why would they… I mean… Holy Crap!

I feel dizzy.

"Are you sure?" I'm an idiot, of course she is. "But why?" I ask, feeling my legs going weak.
"To get your attention?" Barney suggests. "I've seen five tweets today from as many accounts calling you out, taunting you. There may be dozens more, but those are the ones I've found so far."
"Taunting me?"

So while I'm here trying to protect Teresa and trying to figure out how to stop those two, they've been out there in the world trying to confront me and committing murders to get my attention?

"If I just, uh, went to them and talked to them then maybe… I don't know, we could like… end this." I say, my voice cracking.
"And what, get yourself killed?" Celeste asks me. "You'd do that to me?"
"To…"

Okay, well, I don't know what to think about this. She turned me away when I was interested in her, but since her father was murdered by Alejandro's minion Roderick, she seems very clingy. I mean other than pretending to be my girlfriend in front of Teresa when we first came to Georgia. At least that one seemed sort of… I don't know, like she was doing it to be nice because I was looking desperate in front of my ex.

Who I still wish wasn't an *ex*.

"I'm going. I need to do something." I tell them.
"Then I'm going too!" Celeste tells me.
"And me."
"No, you're not." I tell them both. "End of discussion."
"I'm going whether you like it or not." Celeste tells me. "After what those bitches and their… master did to my father…" She pauses a moment, taking a couple of deep breaths. "I'm going. With or without you."
"And me." Barney says.
"It's too dangerous, Barney." I tell him.
"They slaughtered *both* of my parents, Brynne." he says softly. "I'm going."
"No. Jess… she would never forgive me if anything happened to you, and… well, I need someone to stay here and keep an eye on Teresa. You and Jess can do that and try to find out more."
"But Bry–"
"And I have advanced weapons training." Celeste says. "You don't."

I go to my bed while Celeste and Barney argue. Okay, bed is a nice way of describing the pile of blankets I have stuck in a corner on the catwalk above the warehouse floor.

"Jenna, why is this happening?" I ask my doll.

I am amazed that Celeste had the foresight to gather our essentials in her bag before we headed to that mall in Olathe. Maybe she figured we may want to leave in a hurry after confronting her father and rescuing Jess.

After killing Alejandro.

After fighting Marissa and Miranda.

I want those two dead. Marissa was manipulating me, making me believe she cared about me, making me believe that Jessica was a murderer. I'd want her dead for that alone. And Miranda was a part of it, making me see things, including some kind of werewolf-like thing that really was Alejandro.

I suppose he's really the one most to blame. He created them. Everything he touched turned evil and vile. Everything.

That includes me. I guess. He created me, and I'm as unnatural as the rest of them. I just want to get rid of the others and then go off somewhere and die. All of my kind, all… all vampires–for that is what we truly are–deserve to perish.

Does that include Jess, though?

No. No, it can't include Jess. She is only like this because they attacked her. I changed her because I couldn't let her suffer over something that was all my fault. And instead I ended up making things worse, dooming her to this horrible existence.

She is the only proof I need that not every one of the people like us are evil. Because Jess is anything *but* evil.

And I don't have to be.

Sunday, July 27

Jess and Barney whined, but Celeste and I managed to convince them to stay behind. Jess knows how much Teresa still means to me, so she was an easier one to convince than Barney, though even she made me promise to take care of myself and stay away from any fights with Marissa and Miranda.

Of course we still had to fly to Alaska last night, which was harrowing in itself, considering I am *slightly* afraid of heights.

“I expected snow.” I tell Celeste.

We have been in the car for almost an hour now. It didn’t occur to me to bring a heavier coat when we got on the plane last night. I expected there to be snow and cold when we got here, not for it to be over fifty degrees outside. My light jacket doesn’t make me look so out of place, at least.

“Not in July, I guess.” she replies, staring out the window of the rental. “We should be there in half an hour, give or take.”
“So soon?” Geography had never been my strong suit, so I hadn’t even bothered to look at a map before we went. “I think we should, um, stop outside of town so we can… I mean… don’t you think?”
“Maybe,” she says, glancing my way. “Just remember I can’t run as fast as you can, so it needs to be close.”

Our whole point of coming to this little town is to see if Marissa and Miranda are still around. To see if we can take them by surprise and… well, end them. Quickly, if possible.

I hate the idea of violence, but I have to stop them from hurting more people. Possibly even people I love.

Celeste settles the car into a small growth of trees just outside of Bradenborough Pass, close enough to town that we can sneak in without too much trouble, far enough out that Marissa and Miranda

may not know we're coming yet.

It occurs to me that we should have waited to come into town when the sun was up. I can't be in direct sunlight, but I can handle it a lot better than the others can. I burn easily. They could die from it.

Instead, we are sneaking in at night. Luckily we don't come across either of the sisters. Maybe that is bad luck as well, since they are why we came.

Instead we just find a scene that still has stains from all the blood. Whatever had happened in that tiny house, the one blocked off by police tape, it was messy and it was brutal.

"My god, this is awful." Celeste says.

It truly was. There are streaks across the floor where they spread the body parts. It looks like the body had been dismembered, probably into tiny pieces. They probably did so with glee.

"We have to stop them." I mumble.
"You can see where they smeared your name." she points out.

It is there, on the wall. Clearly my name. In wide, bold letters. It has been cleaned off, but not well.

At least they spelled it correctly.

"Can I help you girls?" a man asks from behind us.

I try not to overreact. A part of me wants to sprint away, but I know if I do that I'll abandon Celeste. Plus, what would it accomplish?

Celeste spins around and starts toward the door immediately. I grab her arm and stop her. Running will just cause more problems than it will solve.

"H-hi." I reply to the man.

He's a big guy, with a huge belly and a gray beard. His jacket looks like he made it himself from the coat of some animal he killed himself, and it's kind of dirty. Despite that, he doesn't look disheveled, just… rustic. Even his tiny wire frame glasses seem to fit the image.

Oh yeah, and he has a shotgun. A big one. It's not targeting us, and I'm not entirely worried about it, but I am slightly concerned that it means he isn't going to be as friendly as I would like.

"Did you know the Fieldings?" he asks. His eyes roam over us, taking in all the details.
"You startled us," Celeste tells him, her hand going to her chest. "Yes, I'm Carla." she explains, extending her hand toward him. "I am… *was*, Mr. Fielding's cousin. Distant cousin. I was asked to come here to oversee things."
"Oversee things, huh?" the man says. He sounds suspicious. "You on Al's mom's side, or his dad's?"
"Oh, uh," she says, her eyes flicking to me. "Al's dad was actually my mother's cousin."

"Never met his father." the man says, taking a moment to spit whatever it is he was chewing onto the floor of the porch. "Think Al says he was dead now, yeah?"

"Yes." Celeste agrees. "A while now, actually." She shakes her head. "I haven't seen Al since the funeral. He was pretty torn up."

"Who's this?" he asks her, his head jerking my direction. "'Nother cousin?"

"Um," I manage.

"Actually, no." Celeste tells him. "Well, yes, by marriage." she continues. She grabs onto my hand. "We just married last month."

Wha… uh… she… actually just said that? That's insane! I mean I am… or at least *look* fifteen. He's never going to believe that. And even if he does, what do we gain? Is this a ridiculous cover story in case he blabs to someone, or is she just messing with me?

Probably just messing with me.

But this is Alaska. Aren't they completely off the end of the spectrum on the conservative side? Or was that all just me misunderstanding things because of the news?

"Well, that's nice." he says, his questioning look turning to a smile. "Real happy for you folks." His eyes turn back to the stains on the floor. "Sorry to meet you in a situation like this, ladies. And real damn sorry you had to see this. You shouldn't have." he waves the shotgun out. "Come on over and meet the wife. She's just making breakfast, come have some."

"We don't want to be any trouble." I manage.

"Nonsense." he says, waving again. "Besides, I was supposed to

keep everyone outta this place. Sheriff ask me himself, and I don't want to disappoint old Addie."

We follow the man across the road to a small, weathered looking house. He guides us through a door, which turns out to be the one into the kitchen, where the man–whose name we still do not know–leans over and kisses a woman who is presumably his wife.

"Wife, this is family of Al. This here is Carla, and I didn't catch the wife's name." he says.

"Nora." I say. I smile and nod at the woman. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am." I say.

"You're married?" she asks. She has a look on her face that I am one hundred percent certain means she isn't thrilled with that. "Welcome," she says, forcing a smile. "Have a seat. Would you girls like some breakfast? It's a little early, but Robert and I are heading into Juneau later today, so we had to get an early start. I'm just making sausage and eggs. And some toast. If you'd care for any?"

"We'd love some, ma'am." Celeste tells her, sliding into a seat and removing her glasses to clean them. "Thank you so much." She turns to look up at me. "We have time, don't we hon?"

"Yes!" I say, taking a seat beside her. "Some sausage sounds great. I haven't had any in a long time. Thank you for offering, ma'am."

"Marianne." the woman replies, nodding. "Have Robert get you two coffee, if you like."

"Of course!" he says. "Where are my manners?"

Robert pulls three coffee cups with geese grazing near a pond painted on their sides. He fills them and sets two in front of us before filling the other with a healthy dose of sugar.

"Ladies want milk, sugar?" he asks.

"Milk, if you don't mind." I say. "And a little sugar."

"I like mine black."

"Just like the missus." he says, smiling her way.

"Well," Marianne says, "I can't have coffee these days. Causes my blood pressure to skyrocket."

"Hmph." Robert says, reaching into their antique refrigerator. "Still manages two cups most days." he mumbles, chuckling.

"Well not before a car ride, Robert Miller!" Marianne shoots back. "And while you're rooting around in there, get me two more eggs."

"Yes ma'am." he says.

I don't miss the gentle pat he gives her as he hands the eggs over

and passes by to take his seat.

"The Fielding's didn't have much in the way of valuables around." he tells us. "Wife thought it a burglary gone wrong, but there weren't anything to burgle."

"Robert, don't be impolite." Marianne says, setting one plate with a stack of toast onto the table. "These girls just lost a loved one."

"Shame, that." he says. He shakes his head and looks down. "Good people. Real good people."

"Sandra came to our church for forty years." Marianne adds. "I was at their wedding."

Two more plates make it to the table, one with eggs and one with sausage. She starts scooping some of each onto plates and passing them around.

"Don't suppose either of you girls were there at Al and Sandra's wedding, though." she says. "It was before this one was born, I'd guess." She nods toward me.

"Y'two are mighty young to be marrying." Robert says.

"Twenty-six." Celeste says. "And B… Nora is nineteen."

"That's real nice." Marianne says. "How'd you two meet up?"

"Online." I say.

"At the gym." Celeste says at the same time.

Robert and Marianne look confused. I panic, but I think I manage not to show it. Celeste just laughs it off.

"No Babe, we met at the gym. Remember, we had the Zumba class together?"

"Oh, yes, of course." I agree.

"It wasn't until we saw each other on a dating site that we started going out, though." she tells Robert and Marianne.

"Can't imagine seeing someone I met on one of those places." Robert says.

"Can't imagine seeing another woman." Marianne adds. "Apologies, girls."

"No, it's okay." Celeste tells her.

We eat the breakfast, exchanging small talk about the weather up in Alaska, about what we do for jobs back home in Nebraska–which is where Celeste told them we live. And before long, Marianne is up and doing the dishes.

“Let me help with that.” I offer.

“Nonsense, nonsense.” she says, waving me down into the seat.

“So can I ask,” Celeste begins, “Were there any strangers around before they were killed?”

“Just what I tell Addie when he came.” Robert says. “A couple of girls staying with them.”

“Part of something or other called Air Beebee, I think.” Marianne explained. “Sandra was trying to save for a new Ford.”

“Two girls?” I ask. “What did they look like? When did they leave?”

“Nice girls.” Marianne says. “Cute. Young.”

“They was sisters.” Robert says. “When did they leave, Wife?”

“Must’ve been two days before we found Al and Sandra, I guess.”

“They couldn’t have been involved.” Robert says, looking at us.

“Look girls,” Marianne says, “I know this is difficult. I can’t even imagine how hard it is losing family that way, but those girls were long gone by then. And the sheriff here is good, he will find the killers. Just let him do his job and he’ll make sure the culprits are found.”

“And dealt with.” Robert adds. “Knowing Addie, those killers may just accidentally die while resisting arrest, if you know what I mean.”

They left a couple of days before, so obviously Marissa and Miranda stayed someplace nearby in the intervening two days. Maybe they are still here.

We thank the Millers and leave just as the sun is starting to come up. I need to make sure not to be in direct sunlight too much, I don’t want to burn, but it seems like it is going to be a cloudy day. We check over the Fieldings’ house once more quickly before heading to our car.

“What did you think of them?” Celeste asks.

“He kind of had a Santa Claus look to him.” I say, then add, “I don’t really remember people talking about Santa Claus a lot when I was a kid. Of course we were usually pretty busy, and it was the eighteen-fifties.”

“Something wasn’t right with those two.” Celeste says. “They were just off somehow.” She shakes her head as she pulls the rental car onto the highway. “Anyway, nothing here. I guess we head back.”

Monday, July 28

We land back in Georgia early in the morning, after an excruciating flight for me. I spent twenty minutes in the bathroom vomiting after taking some anti-anxiety medication Celeste offered me to help with my fear of being so high up in an aluminum can that was floating on just a tiny cushion of air. The anti-anxiety medication apparently didn't agree with me. Which is odd, because I don't usually have quite that reaction to medication.

It is quite a relief to walk in to our makeshift home to find Barney and Jess waiting for me.

Except then it isn't.

"Why aren't you watching Teresa?!" I say, rather loudly actually.
"Welcome back." Barney says, offering me a slight smile.
"Jessica!" I shout.
"We need to talk." she tells me.
"No, we need to get to Teresa's." I say. I glance at my watch to check the time. "If she hasn't gone anywhere yet. She should be awake by now."
"I am."

I look immediately to the stairs across the room, right into Teresa's eyes.

She is here.

Why?

"What happened?" I say. "Why are you here?" I look down at Jess. "Why is she here? Did you bring her? You weren't supposed to let her know we were watch–"
"She was attacked." Barney tells me.

Teresa was attacked?! At least she wasn't hurt, right? She doesn't look

hurt.

Please tell me she wasn't hurt.

"Did they track you here?" I ask. I hurry to Teresa's side. "Are you okay?"
"I kind of left them laying in a pile on the street." Jess explains.
"Wait," I say, turning to look at her again. "You left them–"
"It was a bunch of kids I go to school with." Teresa tells me. "Lisa got mad at me and started telling everyone I stole her iPad, so all her friends decided to not only take mine but also destroy my phone and beat the living–"
"They were beating you up?" I ask. "And who is this Lisa and why would she say something like that?"
"Lisa is… *was* my girlfriend." she says. "We broke up the night before last."
"Oh." I say. Except in my head it sounded more like '*Ohhhhhhh!'*
"Because of you." she says, giving me an angry look.

Yes!

Or wait, should I be happy about this? She's upset. I don't really want her to be upset. I want her to be happy. Even if it isn't going to make me happy in the process.

Right?

"And then she…" Teresa says, waving angrily at Jessica. "Dragged me here last night and won't let me go home."
"You're in danger." Jess replies.
"Not at home." Teresa says. "And plus, my poor parents are probably going insane. Do you realize how much trouble I'm going to be in?! I was supposed to be home by eleven."
"They let you stay out 'til eleven?" I ask. "Anyway, we'll get you home. Don't worry."
"Why are you even here, Brynne?"
"Because… this is where we're staying." I say, looking around the building as if I thought that is what she was actually talking about. "We just were out for a little while."
"Here." she says, anger flashing across her face in a way I never saw before. "Georgia." She added. "You know what I meant."
"Well, just… um–"
"I'm going home." Teresa says, starting past me.
"Hold on there, Miss T." Barney says.

Miss T?

Really?

Tell me she didn't ask him to call her that. Please.

"We came here to protect your scraggly ass, so keep that in mind before you wander out into the darkness."

"Scraggly!?" she says, raising her hand as if she were going to hit him.

"Really?" Celeste asks. "That's the part of that sentence you worry about?"

Teresa lowers her hand and steps back, turning her head toward Celeste. After a moment, her head flicks around to me, her eyes penetrating deep into my soul, burning away my resolve with her anger.

"Protect me?" she asks.

"Y-yeah." I say, feeling all the strength go out of me. I so don't want to have this discussion.

"From last year's classmates? Get a grip, Brynne."

"From a pair of psychotic vampire sisters who already killed both of my parents, as well as Celeste's." Barney tells her. "So you might want to think about who has to get a grip."

"Barney!" I shout.

"Just saying it like it is."

Teresa starts shaking, then slumps to the floor. Tears begin to spill down her cheeks and her eyes dart from him to Jess, finally settling on me.

"When?" Teresa asks.

"Last month." I tell her.

"They threatened you, too." Celeste explains.

"I couldn't let them get to you." I say. I lower down to the floor with her. "I won't. Not ever, Teresa. I swear to you."

Her mouth works soundlessly for a moment before closing. Instead, she nods and her eyes glaze over.

"I think she's going to faint." Barney whispers.

"I'm not going to faint!" Teresa says, her head jerking up in his

direction. “I’m shocked, that’s all. And scared, obviously.” She adds, shaking her head. “And so, so sorry, you guys. I liked your parents a lot. They were nice.”
“And now they’re dead.” Barney says.

He stands and walks from the room. I can hear him sniffling as he closes the bathroom door.

“Why me?” Teresa asks.
“Why not?” Celeste responds. She takes a seat where Barney had been. “They’re after the rest of us, so why can’t they go after you as well?”
“Because I’ve never met them, how about?” Teresa says.
“You aren’t missing much.” Jess tells her. “Sorry we didn’t tell you when we first got here. Brynne didn’t want to scare you.”
“Oh thank you *so* much.” Teresa says, sarcasm dripping. “So what next? I’ve got two vampires coming for me, right? Well there’s one vampire-like person here and a bunch of other people, so what’s the plan.”
“Two.” Jess reminds her.
“Oh, yes, sure. I forgot.” Teresa agrees. “So two on two, right? And plus, I’m guessing your girlfriend is good with guns, right?” Teresa asks, gesturing toward Celeste, who is disassembling some handgun that I didn’t even see her get out.
“Not my girlfriend.” I tell Teresa.

Celeste looks hurt by that. I like Celeste. Celeste likes me. But we aren’t together. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I never told her otherwise, and I just… I mean I wanted to be, before. But she waited a long time, and then… then… Well, I guess the spark died. Or fizzled. I still think she’s pretty, and I still kinda like her, but… well, there’s Teresa.

“Whatever.” Teresa says. “Why aren’t you going after them?”
“We don’t have any damn clue where they are.” Celeste tells her.
“If they aren’t here then why am I in danger? And how scared should I be, precisely?”
“Pretty damned scared.”
“Wonderful.” She says, running her hand through her hair.

Teresa gets to her feet and looks around at us. She’s actually handling this rather well, all things considered. I don’t understand how she can handle it so well.

“So what do we do?” Teresa asks.
“Wait.” Jess says.

“Brynne?” Teresa says.
“Yeah, basically,” I say, agreeing with Jess. “We have a contact trying to help us find them, but we have nothing yet. I’ll keep you safe, I promise.”
“Okay then,” she says. “I have to get home.”
“Not really a good plan.” Jessica tells her.
“I’m going!” Teresa says.
“We can’t keep her here forever.” I say, agreeing with Teresa. “We’ll be around to keep an eye on you. If you make plans with Lisa–”
“We broke up.” she reminds me.
“Oh. Well, if you make any other plans then… I don’t know, just text me.”
“Right. Sure.” She shakes her head. “So now I have probation officers. Great.”
“I’ll take her home,” Jess offers. “Come on Teresa, let’s get you back so your parents don’t report you missing or something.”
“If they haven’t already.” Teresa mutters.

Teresa stands and starts toward the door with Jessica, basically ignoring me. And for a moment I notice that she still has a great backside. I can’t help it.

“Wait!” I say. I get up and hurry over to them. “Are you going to be okay?” I ask Teresa.
“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” She shrugs. “I mean I’m scared, yeah, but I’m going to be okay.”
“I promise.”
“Bye Brynne.”
“Bye.”

I watch her walk away. Again. And I can’t help wondering what happened to the girl who was so scared that she couldn’t be with me anymore. So scared she broke up with me.

“What just happened?” I ask.
“Looks like your ex just blew you off again.” Celeste tells me. “Sorry, sweetie.”

First, Teresa *did not* just blow me off. She left because she was angry about everything that has happened, that’s all. Second, it really is starting to annoy me when Celeste calls me sweetie. It’s just… I really wanted her to want me. When she didn’t… it’s… I dunno. It’s almost like that ship has sailed now, and I’m past it.

It's confusing.

She's pretty. Very pretty. Hot, even. And I like her, personality-wise, too. But something just… isn't there. And it makes me feel terrible, because I thought it would be. I thought I could make it be. Like maybe being with her would help me get past Teresa? Maybe.

I don't know. I still like her, just not as much.

Or maybe as much. I don't know.

I'm tired now.

"I'm going to go take a nap." I tell Barney and Celeste. "Celeste, can you update Barney on everything from Alaska?"
"If you want." she says. "Or if you'd like some company–"
"No, I need to sleep." I say, cutting her off. It probably sounded rude, but I'm a little miffed, for some reason. At the whole situation, maybe.

I'm so tired of this. I just want to find Marissa and Miranda and finish them off before they can do any more damage. The rest of life is something I'll think about after that.

Tuesday, August 5

At least we don't have to hide quite as much when watching Teresa. She doesn't seem too thrilled about our presence, but she seems to accept it and go about her day as much as possible. Though I can tell she is very tense and nervous. Of course hearing you are the target of a pair of psychotic vampires could maybe do that to you, I suppose.

Two nights ago there was another attack by the sisters, another location where my name was left behind. San Bernardino.

So far it hasn't made a huge splash nationwide, only CNN comments on a pair of brutal murders in Alaska and California that have some similarities. None of the television networks mention my name being found, and Barney hasn't been able to find any information about it online either. The only way we know about it is Celeste's contact, Barry.

It's so hard to not rush to San Bernardino to try to find them, but I know they won't be there.

"What the hell is this?!" Barney cries.

"What is what?" Celeste asks him. She is sitting ten feet away and her head swivels in his direction.

"Please don't tell me there's another murder site with my name." I say, dread filling me.

"Worse." he says.

I wander to his side, taking my time as I try to delay seeing whatever it is that he thinks is worse than another murder.

"Unbelievable!" Celeste says, her neck and face turning red in anger.

On the screen is a picture of Marianne and Robert Miller. The website is not a major media site, just some smaller one I have never heard of, but it is them. They are giving a description of some

suspicious visitors to the area just before the murders. The description is a very near match to me and Celeste.

"You have to be kidding me?" I mumble. "This is so unfair!"

"Fair is a weak concept." Celeste states.

"The Millers seemed like such a nice couple." I tell her. "Why would they lie like this?"

"I'll give you two guesses." Barney tells me. He smiles weakly. "I bet you'll only need one, though."

"Those… those… those jerks!" I shout, slapping my hand against my thigh hard enough to hurt.

"I'd have a harsher description than that," Celeste says, "But yes."

Robert and Marianne Miller both seemed so nice, though. Even though she clearly wasn't that happy with a same sex couple, she was nice to us. And she wouldn't do something like this just because she dislikes gays.

"Maybe they manipulated those two like they tried to do to me." I offer.

"Maybe." Barney agrees. "It wouldn't surprise me."

"Maybe they expect us to respond to this, violently, thus providing more evidence that you were the actual killer." Celeste adds.

"That actually makes a warped kind of sense." Barney tells her.

"Yes," she says. "But to what end?"

"Huh?" is my brilliant contribution to the conversation.

"Why would they try to prove you were the killer if all they were trying to do is taunt us?" she answers.

"But, um…" I don't know what I want to ask, really. "Why?"

"Exactly." She agrees. "So I don't know their end goal here, unless it's just to anger us further."

"I need to… um…" I glance at my phone screen. "I need to go relieve Jess."

My head hurts when I leave our warehouse, and I still can't see any point to them even leaving my name behind, let alone setting the Millers up. Whatever it is, they are making me a nervous wreck.

Just when are they coming for Teresa?

And how do we stop them when it happens?

I watch Teresa as she sits on the back deck, reading. She wasn't

exactly a big reader before, so it seems kind of odd to me. It makes me wonder how many other things about her have changed in the last year.

The book is called *A Thousand Pieces of You,* and she seems to be enjoying it a lot. I may have to try reading it sometime. It must be good, she keeps ignoring the beep of her cellphone on the table next to her. It is starting to annoy me. I am about to yell for her to answer the stupid text.

Lisa hasn't been around since last week. At least I haven't heard or seen her. I guess they really did break up. So should I be happy about that? I mean I want to be. I don't want her to be unhappy, but it seems nice that she broke up with Lisa over me. Although I'm kind of curious how it was about me, since Teresa didn't exactly seem happy to see me the last time we spoke.

Of course that was when Jess was holding her hostage, so…

But still, you'd think that she would have contacted me since then. She has my number. I know she does. I made sure she does. Even if she didn't, she knows we're watching her now. She knows all she has to do is wave her hand or say my name and I will come running.

Why doesn't she?

So maybe their breakup wasn't about me? Or maybe it was about me, but it wasn't because Teresa wanted to be with me again. Maybe they got into an argument about how Teresa could have ever dated someone like me? Maybe Lisa just doesn't like me, for some reason.

New attack across state line in AL. B there soon. Keep eyes open and b careful.

It is a text from Jess. So yeah, that sucks. They are getting closer, and that means they probably know we are here and maybe even plan to attack Teresa.

I hurry across her yard to her side, startling her when she glances up and I am suddenly there.

"Brynne!" she says, jerking up in her seat. "Don't do that!"
"Sorry." I say. I scan her yard. "Didn't mean to scare you."

“Well it’s too late for that.” She says. Her hand is on her chest now. “What the hell are you doing?”

“We need to go inside.” I tell her.

She looks at me with her eyes wide and blinking, her mouth agape. How do I tell her she is about to be attacked without terrifying her even more?

“Inside.” I repeat.

“Why? What’s going–”

“We just…”

We just what? Need to be careful, in case the vampires come to kill her. Except I can’t say that. And really, I’m not so sure being inside is all that much safer. Though a little safer is better than nothing.

“We need to… there’s been…” Ugh! “It’s safer, okay! Don’t argue.”

I grab her arm and pull her from her seat, ignoring her complaints that I am hurting her and her demands that I explain what is going on. Before we even get to the door, Jess shows up.

“That was fast.” I tell her.

“What the hell!” Teresa says loudly.

“Teri, who are you talking to?” Her mother shouts from the kitchen, which we are already entering.

“Mom, I–”

“H-hi, Mrs. Bittel.” I say.

“Oh.” Teresa’s mother says. “You.”

Her eyes burn into me. After a moment they flick to Jessica, but return to me. She is angry, obviously. And confused.

“I’m sorry, what was your name?” she asks.

“It’s Brynne.” Teresa answers for me.

“Right, Brynne.” Mrs. Bittel says. “What are you doing here?” she asks me, then turns her head to Teresa. “Teri, what is she doing here?”

“We’re just passing through and stopped in to say hi.” Jess answers.

“Right. And you are?”

“I’m Jessica Sloan, Mrs. Bittel.”

“She’s Tony’s girlfriend, Mom. Didn’t you–” Teresa says.

"Ex." Jess interjects.

"Didn't you meet her last summer?"

"No, I don't think I did. Teri, when you have visitors you should warn me. I would have had some treats ready for you kids."

"Oh, that's okay Mrs. Bittel." Jess tells her.

"They won't be here long, anyway." Teresa says.

"Teri, don't be rude." Her mother says, moving around the island toward us. "Would you girls like something to drink at least? We have some Coke, I believe. I could prepare some tea, I suppose."

"No thanks, Mrs. Bittel." I say.

"It's just Sabrina, Brynne."

She settles at the table and motions for the rest of us to join her. I am not too thrilled with the idea, but I do it. I don't want to seem rude. Still, my eyes keep going to the sliding glass door that leads to the outside. This is too visible and accessible.

"So you two aren't getting back together, are you?" Sabrina asks. "It's okay if you are." she adds quickly.

"Hell no." Teresa says.

"Teri!"

"I meant heck." Teresa says, her face turning red. "Anyway, we are not getting back together. Besides," she shrugs. "They said they're just passing through."

"Yes, we are." Jess says.

"And Brynne has a girlfriend already." Teresa adds.

"I see." Sabrina says.

No, she doesn't. And everyone is just sort of staring at each other now. Plus, I *do not* have a girlfriend already. I sort of wanted to, at one point, but… something is just not right when I picture myself and Celeste together.

Okay, I know what's not right. She was never going to be anything other than a filler, and I know it. It was probably a bad idea to ever even express interest in her, and was probably not very smart to even consider being with her, because the only two girls I've ever felt close to in my entire, long life are both in this room. One is completely straight, the other is apparently not interested in me anymore.

Why can't she just feel the same way I do?

"I don't have a girlfriend." I say softly.

"Hm?" Sabrina says.

“That girl who was with you…” Teresa begins. “Isn’t she? I mean she said–”
“I know what she said, but it’s not true.” I explain. “She just… she thought I would be… upset, and well, she was just trying to be nice.”
“How was that being nice?” Teresa asks.
“What is she talking about, Teri?”
“She thought I… I mean it was because you were with the other girl, and she thought I would want to, I don’t know, make you jealous maybe, or something.”
“But why would you want–”

We are interrupted by Jessica’s cell ringing. She answers it immediately. After a couple of ‘oh’s, and a ‘good’, she hangs up. She looks more relaxed when she looks up from her phone to me.

“All clear.” Jess says. Obviously she forgot that I could hear the entire conversation. Honestly, the girl has super hearing and still can’t remember that I hear very well also.
“All clear?” Mrs. Bittel asks.
“Oh.” I say. “Good.”
“Great.” Teresa says. “So have a safe trip, you two.”
“Yeah, um,” I say. I give a weak wave at Mrs. Bittel as I stand. “Thanks for, um, your hospitality, ma’am. We’ll be going now.”

We are out the door before Mrs. Bittel can even finish asking where we are going. I overheard her asking Teresa what was going on, and why we were going out the back.

“Another attack.” Jess says.
“Yeah, New York.”
“Right.” She nods and turns away. “We should be clear now. I’ll see you at changeover, honey.”
“Wait,” I grab her arm. “They seem to be getting closer and more frequent.”
“Yeah. I’m going to discuss that with Celeste when I get back. We need to start making more plans, I think.”
“Okay. Well… have fun.”
“You too.”

Thursday, August 7

No new attacks in the last two days, but during an interview on television the New York police mentioned that they were looking into a few possibilities, including a serial killer, a gang, and he seemed to really linger when he mentioned that the killing may be by a cult.

A cult.

Great. So they are going to go that way. I suppose when you start finding bodies drained of blood all over the country that maybe it is natural to think it is somehow related to cult slayings. Still, it feels dangerous. Well, I've seen that before, I guess. I can already tell it's coming.

Teresa dips her toe in the pool at the gym where her family has a membership. I watch from across the room, where I read a book. Or rather, pretend to read a book. I had to sneak in, of course. Not terribly difficult, but I keep wondering when someone will realize I don't belong here. I don't have a membership, and I'm not even the guest of a member because Teresa didn't bother to even ask me.

She isn't quite the fun, spunky girl she used to be. Still nice, I guess--at least to others. She seems kind of upset with me, though.

Why is that guy in the suit sitting there watching her? What a pervert! I don't understand why a middle-aged man would just sit and stare at teenage girls. Ugh! I ought to go over there and smack him around.

Except of course that would kind of draw attention to me, which I'm trying to avoid.

A part of me just wants to go. Run away and leave this all behind. Let whatever happens, happen. Relocate to someplace like Paris. I could go there, pretend to be an American moving there with my parents, and probably make it work.

But this is my fight. If I fought before then maybe we wouldn't be here now. Maybe Peggy and Ted would still be alive. Maybe a lot of people would, I guess.

I should have been stopping vampires all along. Someone should have, anyway. Even if that only entailed searching them out and reporting them to the VI, once I was aware of the VI's existence, it would have been doing something. Instead I sat back and let more and more people die because of us unnatural creatures.

So I have to fight. And I really have to protect Teresa, anyway, even if she isn't interested in me anymore. I'm the reason she's in danger.

I wish I had Jenna here with me.

Grow up, girl! Ugh. Sometimes I hate this, being so childish. I'm one of the oldest living people alive!

Oh great, Teresa is leaving and I almost missed it because of Mr. suit wearer over there. As Barney would say, get your head in the game, Brynne. Head in the game.

Teresa doesn't shower or change before leaving, just dries and slides some shorts and a tee on over her swimsuit, so she is quick to leave the building. She walks, and I follow at a distance, toward a bus stop several blocks down.

Should I go talk to her? Maybe she'd want to stop somewhere for some ice-cream, or even to see a movie. Maybe there's another penguin movie on?

While I am arguing with myself about asking Teresa to go do something, three guys step from a car at the curb. It makes me nervous, so I move just a little faster. And then two more step out from an entryway to an appliance store. All five are converging on Teresa.

One of them reaches into his pocket and pulls out a gun.

"No!" I shout, just as a shot fires.

Time slows to a standstill. I hurry to Teresa's side, grabbing onto her before she hit the ground.

The men manage to inch closer.

After that it is all a blur. I break one man's leg, and I think I dislocated someone's jaw, too. There is an awful lot of blood on the wall where one of the men crashed when I shoved him, and I imagine he has several broken ribs now.

One of them looks dead.

I drag Teresa off, hurrying away faster than anyone human could ever move, and don't stop until several blocks later, when I have a chance to move her behind a dumpster in an alley.

"Teresa!" I say, lightly slapping at her cheek. "Stay with me."

My tears burn as they track their way down my cheek. She is still breathing, but her eyes are unfocused. She isn't talking, and she is very, very pale.

"T-teresa, please speak to…" I stop and swallow as she chokes. "Please don't die."
"Holy damn," she murmurs. "Ahhhh, that burns like hell!" she adds, a little louder now.

Her eyes begin to focus in on me. She is in a lot of pain, I can tell, and very angry. And it looks like she is angry *at* me.

"What happened?" she asks.
"You've been shot." I tell her. I put pressure on her side. "I'll get you to a hospital, you'll be okay."
"How… bad?" she asks. She shivers. "I don't want to die. I don't want to die, Brynne. I don't want–"
"You're not going to die!" I say quickly.
"I don't want to die." she repeats.
"You aren't going to die."

I finally have a chance to pull her shirt up a little and see the wound. There isn't that much blood. I don't know if that is good or bad.

"I can't tell how bad." I tell her. "There isn't much blood."
"Home." she says. "I don't want to die." She leans her head back.
"You need to get to the hospital."
"My parents!" She jerks her head up. "I can't tell my parents about this. They'll never… they won't understand, and *I* don't understand!"

“I’ll help you up, come on. Do you know where the nearest hospital is?”
“No hospitals.” she says, shaking her head. “Mom and Dad will find out.”
“You need–”
“Can’t… you do it?” she asks, focusing on me.
“I don’t know how to remove a bullet, and I have no idea about internal injuries, Teresa.”
“No, I mean… can’t you… ya know? Like with Jessica?”

Can’t I do it?

Turn her into a vampire. That’s what she wants. She wants to be a disgusting, horrid, damned for eternity vampire.

“No!” I shout. “Absolutely not!”
“Brynne,”
“Don’t even think about it, Teresa!”
“Oh what, so you’ll save Jessica but not me?”
“You don’t *need* saving.” I tell her.

Why is she doing this? Guilting me. Like I need more to feel guilty about. I will not feel guilty about doing what I did to Jess and not making that same mistake with her.

I won’t.

I swear I won’t.

“But if I did?”
“No.”
“Because I’m not worth it?”

Of course I won’t. I am not going to let myself feel guilty over this. I have enough other things to worry about.

Who am I kidding?

“Where is this coming from?” I ask her. “First you break up with me because you can’t handle everything, now–”
“Because I was scared, Brynne!”
“Good. You should be scared. Still. And that’s all, you need to get to the hospital.”
“I am still scared!” she says, shoving at me. “You think I’m not? But

dammit, I can't even protect myself from whoever or *whatever* is coming after me."
"Ter–"
"And it's your fault, Brynne Campbell!"

Yes, it is. And there is no way to fix this. Not by making her a monster.

"Teresa,"
"And what happens if you get hurt, or… or worse? Huh?" she asks.
"I'm not going to–"
"What if!"
"Then Jess will protect you. And Barney. And Celeste."
"Puh, right. Sure." She turns away from me and stares up at the sky. "What good would that do?"
"They could get you away. They'd protect you."
"But they couldn't bring you back." she says. "Could they?"

Bring me back. Well no, they couldn't bring me back if I was killed. But that wouldn't stop her from being protected. They would still take care of her, if only because they know how much she means to me.

"I'd miss you." she whispers.

She'd miss me? What is this? She… would miss me. Like she has missed me in the past year? Yeah, sure.

"You made it pretty clear how you feel." I tell her. "Now we go to the hospital."
"I don't want to go to the hospital." she says. "This isn't that bad." She pulls her shirt up and pokes at the wound and winces. "I think it just grazed me. Maybe you can take me back to your place so we can bandage it."
"Are you sure it just grazed you?" I ask, looking at her side. "I don't want to take any chances."
"I'm sure. You can have your new girlfriend check it, if you want. Jess tells me she was kind of some paramilitary type, so she probably has first aid experience."
"Let me see it."

She's right, it doesn't look that bad. Thank God! I was so scared that she was going to die.

"Okay, let's go see if we can get that bandaged."

When we get there I ask Celeste to look at it, like Teresa suggested. Sure enough, it was just a graze. Some cleaning and bandaging and it is okay.

The big puzzle is who it was who attacked her. I didn't recognize any of them, and I don't think they were vampires. So what does that leave?

"I'm going to check in with Barry to see if he has heard anything." Celeste says, before disappearing into the back.

I hope there isn't any more killings. Please. I really would just let them get me if it would stop all this. But it won't. All it will do is get me out of the way for them to keep killing more and more people. Their type have to be disposed of. Permanently.

"Do you think Marissa and Miranda could have convinced someone to get her?" Barney asks.
"Maybe." I say.
"I don't understand this." Teresa tells us. "It makes no sense to come after me, I didn't do anything."
"Hmph." Celeste mumbles, reentering the room.
"To get to me." I say, responding to Teresa. "Sorry. I promise we'll protect you."
"Okay." Teresa says. She nods. "Who is protecting you?"

I didn't really expect that question. I protect me. I'm the one with the superhuman capabilities, so why would I need protected? Though, I guess, my enemies also have abilities, and they are very deranged.

"It's a fair question." Barney says.
"Especially since Barry confirmed that the VI are now a part of this." Celeste says, nodding in agreement.
"They were the ones who went after Teresa." Barney explains. "They're just pawns of the psychos now."
"Oh great." I say. "Well, yay."
"And they know we're here protecting her." Celeste adds.
"Oh yay." I say. I slip off the desk and pace across the room.
"Yay is right." she agrees.
"Uh, excuse me," Teresa says. "Who is the VI?"

I leave Barney to explain that all to her. I plop onto the stairs and lean back, trying to think.

“Where is Jess?” I ask the room.
“On a date, believe it or not.” Celeste tells me.
“A date? Seriously?” She’s dating in the middle of all of this?
“Yep. Apparently yesterday, while she was procuring groceries, some boy she described as ‘cute’ and ‘nice’ asked her out.”
“Oh.”

She met a cute boy somewhere. Well I’m sure he isn’t that cute, right? I mean she won’t, like, go off with him and abandon me? Abandon all of us?

Don’t be silly, Brynne.

“Well I hope she has fun.”
“I do not believe now is the time I would rekindle my dating life if I were her.” Celeste says.
“I just hope she enjoys herself and stays safe.”
“Speaking of safe,” Teresa says, apparently hearing us from her spot halfway across the room. “You never answered me.”

Answer her? Oh, about me being safe. Nobody is safe here. None of us. Not one person in the country, possibly even on the planet, is safe while those two are on the loose.

And now the VI.

“I’m keeping her safe.” Celeste answers.
“Not very well.” Teresa replies.
“Now look–”
“No offense.” Teresa says, raising her hands as she steps toward us. “I’m sure you’re trying, and you’ll do your best. I mean she is your girlfriend.”
“Right.” Celeste says at the same time as I say “No I’m not.”

Celeste looks hurt. I can’t help it, I am not going to lie just to make her feel better. And I have made this clear several times now.

“I don’t have time for a girlfriend.” I say. “Sorry.”
“Anyway, you’re not a vampire.” Teresa says, motioning toward Celeste. “Unless you know something I don’t–”
“I do.” Celeste says.
“Then you aren’t going to be able to protect her from the other vampires out there who want to hurt her.”

“Or the other things.” Barney adds in agreement.
“Exactly.” Teresa stops and turns toward him, a confused look on her face. “What *other things*?”
“You really don’t want to know.” he says.

That much is probably true. Though I suspect we really should tell her what we know.

Now if I could just get Celeste to tell me all that she knows. I don’t think she has told us about everything yet. Not all the different kinds of creatures that may exist out there. I know there have to be more than striga and vampires.

“So anyway,” Teresa says, shaking her head as she turns back to me. “You need a bodyguard. Someone as capable as you who can watch your back and help out.”
“I have Jess.” I tell her.
“Yes, but she’s busy watching me. Plus, there are two of the others, yes? So two on two isn’t great odds.”
“Especially since we have the VI bastards to contend with.” Barney agrees.
“You need another vampire.”
“And you, I assume, are volunteering?” Celeste asks, a smile on her face. “Commendable, but you are just a child. If Brynne is going to convert someone to help then it should be a grown woman, not a little girl.”
“I’m not a little girl!” Teresa insists, glaring at her. “And what, you want to be a vampire? Puh, you’d suck at it.”
“Pun intended?”
“Pun… what?” Teresa says, shaking her head. “Look lady, I can protect Brynne better than you can, I know her better than–”
“Not anymore you don’t.”
“Well… but… I know what she’s like, and–”
“Do I have any say in this?” I ask.

That shuts them both up. They look at me, waiting for me to continue.

How, exactly, did we get here? Now I have two people wanting to be a vampire *so they can protect me*. Uh-huh.

This is a bad dream, right?

“Neither of you are being changed by me, so get over it.” I say.

Before they can argue any further, I disappear up the stairs. I don't even understand what is going on with them. Why would they even want this life?

Okay, well, I've seen all the movies. The ones that make this look all glamorous and amazing. But it is not like that. We are monsters. *I* am a monster. And we all have to be eliminated. Every last one of us.

Except Jess. Never Jess.

***

It is late when Jess gets home. I didn't want to take Teresa back until I had more help watching her, and I didn't know enough about what to expect next to feel safe letting her go home anyway, so she tells her parents she is staying at a friend's house tonight. She's down on the sofa.

And Jess is home now. I can hear her coming up the stairs.

"Honey, I'm home." she whispers. "So you were attacked? I guess you're okay, since Celeste said you were."
"Yeah. And it was Teresa who was attacked."
"Explains why she's snoring away downstairs." she says. She sits heavily on the end of the table I was using as a bed.
"How'd the date go?" I ask her. "Tell me about him."
"He was cute, I guess." she says, disappointment dripping from her voice as she shrugs. "Nothing was there. I mean he was nice and all, but I just wasn't feeling it."
"I'm sorry, Jess."
"Why is every guy I meet like this?" she asks, slamming her hand down hard enough that the table complains. "I just want a nice, sweet guy that I can feel a bond with. Someone who gets me, someone I can be close with. Someone attractive, obviously, and someone gentle and kind."
"Didn't Tony fit most of that?"
"Well yeah, but…" she sighs. "But I don't know. There just wasn't any feeling there. No spark."
"Sorry, Jess. You'll find the right guy someday."
"Yeah, maybe." she says. "I'm going to take a shower."

I don't know if Jess ever will find that guy, though. Not that he doesn't exist for her, but she's going to have the same problem I have, which is how to handle the fact that we barely age while they get

older and older.

Would she change the guy?

Could I let her?

Would it be any different than me changing Teresa, if I did it?

Or different than when I changed her, for that matter?

If Jess had a vampire boyfriend, would it come between us?

Monday, August 11

Teresa and I sit in their living room, watching a movie on Netflix. Since being attacked last week, she is much happier to have Jess or me spend time hanging out with her. We have also surreptitiously added tiny cameras around the perimeter of her yard, as well as down the street, so that either Barney or Celeste can monitor them as much as possible and send help if we need it.

"I'm ordering Chinese for dinner," Mrs. Bittel says. "What would you girls like?"
"Pork fried rice." Teresa tells her. "Oh, don't forget the egg rolls this time, Mom."
"Brynne?"
"Nothing for me, Mrs. Bittel. Thanks."
"Oh, bless your heart, Brynne, but I've asked you several times now to call me Sabrina." she says, sounding slightly angry.
"Sorry."

Mrs. Bittel, *Sabrina*, goes out to the kitchen to place the order away from the noise of the television.

What are we watching? A vampire movie, of course.

Because… yeah.

Of course we are.

I guess I understand the fascination with these movies that a lot of people have. They make vampires seem so perfect in some of them. Make their lives out to be so wonderful, so terrific. And maybe that's the problem. A vampire's life is not perfect. It's not all falling in love and having eternity together. It's not all running fast and seeing in the dark.

"Is this what you want?" I ask Teresa.
"It's a good movie." she says, smiling as the lead actress slams a

man who is being rude to the ground.

"It's not real."

"But it's a good movie."

"Do you think it's what your life would be like if I changed you, though?" I ask. "Life isn't like that. It sucks, in so many ways, Teresa."

"Brynne,"

"You have to drink blood, you know. Like, seriously. And avoid the sun. And you can never stay in one place very long without people starting to wonder why you don't get older. It's lonely."

"It doesn't have to be."

"And scary. People want to kill us. A lot."

"People want to kill us now." she says.

"What in heavens are you girls talking about?" Sabrina asks, reentering the room.

Teresa gets a panicked look on her face.

"Oh, we just, um, we're talking about if we were going to school with them." I say, gesturing toward the screen.

The confused look on Sabrina's face would be funny if I wasn't worried she'll ask more questions that I don't have answers for. But instead she blinks hard, then lays her hand on Teresa's shoulder.

"I worry about you watching so many of these horrible movies, Teri. I don't know why you like them so much."
"They're just fun." Teresa says, shrugging and offering an over-the-top smile. "You should watch with us."
"No, thank you. I'm going to take a shower. Your father and I are going to Linnet's after dinner and I want to be ready before he gets home."
"Okay." Teresa says. "I'll set your food aside when it gets here."
"And don't let your brother get to it!" Sabrina warns. "That boy will suck down my cashew chicken right along with his moo goo if you let him."
"Got it."

We watch the movie and wait. Soon enough, the food arrives and Teresa starts eating as we watch. I find it sort of fascinating, strangely. I don't remember ever just watching her eat like this. She takes such tiny bites.

"What?" she asks.
"Just watching you."

“Yeah, I got that.” She points her spoon at the television. “Watch the movie, you’re making me uncomfortable.”
“Sorry.”

I swivel my head toward the screen and make a concerted effort to at least look like I am watching. It isn’t working. Her microscopic bites and determined chewing is distracting me. I don’t think she realizes how loud it seems to me. Not in a bad way, just that I can’t disregard it completely.

“You’re even prettier than before.” I say.

Did I just say that aloud? Oh great, now I’m just going to go about embarrassing myself.

But she wants to protect me!

That has to mean she’s interested in getting back together with me, right? Why else would she care?

“Thank you.” she responds calmly.
“I’ve missed you so much the past year.”
“Brynne,” she says, putting her container of rice down on the coffee table. “I think–”
“Where are the rest of the egg rolls?” Andre interrupts, hurrying into the room. “I only got one.”
“What?” Teresa asks. “Hey, that’s all you get.”
“Mom was supposed to order a lot. Where are you hiding them, dufus?”
“I’m not hidi–”
“Did she already eat them?” he asks me. “She ate them.”
“No, I don’t think–” I begin.
“I haven’t had even *one*!” Teresa shouts. “Leave us alone, pervert. You just wanted an excuse to pester Brynne.”
“I couldn’t care less about your little girlfriend, *princess*, I just want my food.” he says, looking under sofa cushions like he expects her to be hiding them there.
“Princess!”
“You always get your way, and you know it. You probably tells Mom not to order me any egg rolls, didn’t you?”
“What is your damage?”
“What’s yours?”
“Go away!” she squeals.

Amazingly, he does. I suppose he decided his food wasn't there. Instead, he goes through into the kitchen, I assume to look for the missing egg rolls.

"Mom dropped him on his head when he was a baby." she tells me. "Repeatedly."

"Explains the hair." I say, smiling.

My phone dings with a text. I'm beginning to dread that sound. Lately it seems to be bad news most of the time.

Ugh. Like now.

"Problem?" Teresa asks.

"Three more attacks." I tell her. "Nashville, Wichita, and Houston."

"So tell me this: how do they do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Attack in so many places. There are two of them, right? So how in three places at once."

"Oh, we know they have help." I tell her.

I thought she knew this. She was there when Celeste told us the VI were a part of this.

"So now they have humans killing people?" she asks. It sounds like she is asking about the weather. "They aren't vampires also?"

"As far as I know."

"I see." she says, doing a half-nod and shrugging before she turned her attention back to the television.

She's seriously taking this like it's nothing? Like she shouldn't worry in the least? Good grief, how can she be so… I don't even know the word!

Blasé?

"You don't seem, um… alarmed, or anything." I point out.

"I don't?" she asks. She shrugs again. "I'm terrified. Mostly I'm scared something will happen to you if you try to protect me."

"You wouldn't be in danger if it weren't for me."

"There's a fault in your logic." she tells me. She turns the television off and looks my way.

"Huh?"

“There is a fault in your logic.” she repeats, enunciating each word carefully.

“Oh.”

So what is it? If she had never met me she wouldn’t have vampires and monsters coming after her. So it basically comes down to my very existence being the root of this problem.

“You aren’t going to ask me what the fault is, love?” she asks.

She hasn’t called me that in a very long time. It seems to have caught even her off guard. I don’t think she meant to do it.

So why does it make my insides tingle?

“So what is it?” I give in and ask.

“Let’s say you and I had never met,” she begins. “What would you do in this case?”

“I’d take Jess and Barney and hide.”

“Not Celeste?” she asks, smirking.

“Oh, uh, yeah.”

How could I forget her like that. Yes, I’d have to make sure she was safe as well. Of course I would.

“I don’t get your point.” I say.

“The point is that you only came here and put yourself in danger to protect me. If it weren’t for me you’d probably be in Europe somewhere, avoiding the whole mess.”

“Not Europe. Probably still in the U.S.” I reply. “But I still wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh? Why is that? Wasn’t that your M.O. before?” she asks.

“This isn’t like before, though. This is personal. They are killing people *because* of me.”

“They are killing people because of them, not you. You can’t blame yourself.”

I wish I could feel that way. Yes, a part of me believes this is all Alejandro’s fault. Because he changed them, of course, but also because he also changed me. Created me. Made me what I am.

Life would be so much easier if I was just a normal person and didn’t know anything about this. I never would have met Jess, though. I never would have met Teresa.

Wednesday, August 13

"... and we're still not any closer to figuring out how to stop them." Celeste finishes.

We are discussing the fact that we can't just sit here and wait forever, we have to go out and do something. Soon. People have been dying all over the place.

"Oh this is good." Barney says. He is sitting across the room, at his computer.
"What's that?" Celeste asks.
"The FBI is getting involved." Barney explains. "They think Brynne is an organized terrorist group."
"I've been accused of a lot of things, but never that one." I say, trying not to let it get to me.
"It gets worse." he says. He doesn't elaborate.

How can it get worse? People are dying because of me. The police, and now the FBI, think that I'm the head of some terrorist group. Homeland security is probably involved at this point, I guess. So now we not only have to contend with the Marissa, Miranda, the VI, and whatever else they have found for unnatural creatures, but we have national law enforcement against us.

This is getting nuts.

"You guys should just go away somewhere and hide." I tell Celeste and Barney. "Take Jess and disappear. They want me, not you, so… I mean if I were to just turn myself in, then–"
"Not a chance." Barney says.
"They murdered my dad." Celeste says flatly. "In front of me." She pauses and turns to glare at me. "There is not one chance in hell that I'm stopping before those two are in pieces and rotting."
"Uh-oh." Barney says. "Guys, we need to move." He was up out of his chair already. "Now!"

On the monitor are little split-screens of the cameras at Teresa's house. In the ten images I can see at least a dozen people converging on the house, most with weapons out and ready.

I don't wait for Barney and Celeste to grab their ready-bags, and I don't wait for the car. Instead I run, knowing I can probably beat them there.

Jess is there protecting Teresa alone!

I race along the streets as quickly as I can, but it is going to be too late. I only hope that Jess will be able to hold them off until I can get there, and that together we will be able to get Teresa out or hold the rest back until Celeste and Barney show up to reinforce us.

God, don't let Jess be hurt. Please.

Or Teresa.

That's Teresa's house ahead. Oh please be safe. Oh please oh please oh please!

"Jess!" I scream out.

I can see several suited people outside, and one of them is on the ground with a lot of blood.

Did Jess do that? I didn't expect her to be so vicious against people unless there was no way to run. Is there no way to run? Do they have her surrounded and she had to fight back?

This is the longest section of road of all time! Why is it taking so darn long for me to get there? Why can't I run faster!

I finally, finally make my way into Teresa's yard. Two of the suited men swivel their heads to see me. Both of them raise guns, but I am on them too quickly for them to shoot before I respond.

"Marx!" one of them shouts, as I bend the arm the other had been holding the gun with backwards, breaking it with an audible snap, severely dislocating his shoulder in the process.

After shoving the one with the dislocated shoulder against the house hard enough to knock the wind out of him, possibly breaking

some of his ribs in the process, I turn on the other one and grab the gun from his hand, turning it around to use as a club to bludgeon him multiple times in the shoulders and chest, ruling him inconsequential to the remaining fight as he grabs at his broken collar bones.

Yes, both of them.

Now is not the time to be nice, and I am not going to be. Jess and Teresa are around somewhere, and whatever is going on is bad enough that Jess was scared enough to have torn the limb from the poor guy on the lawn. I won't risk taking it easy on these people in these circumstances.

But I'm also not a complete monster. I'm not about to kill anyone I don't have to. It makes me sad that Jess had to do that to that guy; it is too permanent and will hamper him the rest of his life. I don't doubt for one second that she found it necessary, though. I trust Jess.

Three more suits ahead, all armed with one kind of weapon or other. I manage to sweep the legs from under one, shoving him forward into another as I do so. There is a loud noise as their heads thwunk together, knocking both unconscious.

I hope that didn't fracture their skulls.

A dog growl from inside the house distracts me for a moment, and it costs me. As my attention is turned to the door one of the suits gets a shot off, landing a hit on the left side of my rib cage.

Ow!

Okay, well, I know I told Peggy this before, but bullets *really hurt*.

Like, a lot.

But I can't let it stop me. I only halfway wonder what kind of dog Teresa has gotten as I turn on the shooter. And I don't feel quite as bad when I kick him hard enough in the groin that I actually may have caused permanent damage, like maybe a broken pelvis.

Seriously.

With that one taken care of, the remaining suited figure–a

woman, I just realized–drops her gun and holds up her hands.

So what do I do with her? I can't just leave her here to pick up a gun and shoot me in the back. Not to mention the fact that Celeste and Barney will be arriving soon, and I don't want them hurt.

I very reluctantly knock her out by shoving her backwards against the wall. I hate having to do that. Still, I can't leave her behind to just attack again. Or even if all she did was report in by radio, it could be problematic.

I grab an arm as one agent steps through the door, his pistol held out in front of him. I yank hard, hearing another bone break as I press against the door frame, then pull the agent through and knee him in the ribs hard enough to break a couple.

Who leads with their gun these days? Seriously, don't these people ever watch old movies? That's a real no-no.

I step into the house through the side door, seeing blood smears all about, and yet another agent laying on the floor with a bite to his neck.

Not Jess' work, clearly.

Teresa's dog must be fierce. I'm really glad she got it. Why didn't I think of that? Guard dogs are a great addition.

A gunshot from upstairs gets my attention, and upon listening closely I hear at least four separate sets of feet. Swearing from two of them lets me know that things are not going as well for them as they would like.

I race up the stairs to find the four agents standing at the door to the attic. The four are distracted with the door, which seems to be holding strong for the moment. I start their direction, but notice yet more dog bites, these along the legs of the agents.

And then I see the dogs.

If you can call them dogs.

They are large–nearly four feet to the top of their heads and most likely weighing in at over two hundred pounds. Their fur consists of

black and brown blotches of matted scraps intertwined with bare sections, and in some areas there are even bloody spots where the fur looks to have been peeled back. And their eyes emit a flaming glow that shines out against the door frame nearest them.

Why didn't we notice those on the cameras?

The two of them are pacing into and out of the nearest room to the agents, huffing and sniffing at the air. As I watch, unclear of what I am actually seeing and fearing that I could be again under the influence of Miranda, one shimmers.

Shimmers. As in phase out of existence. As in goes invisible.

It is only briefly, but it is the first time I have ever seen that. I've never even heard of anything that could do that. How is it possible?

Except their eyes. Their eyes didn't disappear, did they? Did they?

One of the dogs' ears perk up and its nose twitches. And it turns to look right. At. me.

Oh crap!

It throws back its head, letting out a… a laugh, like a hyena. Then it charges.

And I run.

They are upon me before I make it through the front door. One nips at my foot, tripping me and making me stumble. I grab the door frame, pulling myself through to the outside, as I kick at the nearest one.

I make it back to my feet, screaming out at them as I kick and punch. One manages to make its way behind me, and is nipping at hands and legs while the one in front growls and snaps at my face.

"What the?!" I hear Barney scream out.

I turn my head to yell for them to get back in the car and leave. As I do, the one between me and them shimmers out again, leaving two dots of fire floating in midair.

"Oh hell." Celeste says.

“Go!” I shout.

I turn, grab the one between us and do my best to break an arm, a leg… something, anything, to slow it down and buy them time to escape. As I do, the one that has been biting at my face–now behind me–sinks its teeth deep into my calf. I feel a tearing, followed by a pain so intense that I lose grip on the one I am trying to disable.

Two loud reports ring out, then the dog before me slows and slumps in its attempts to rise and escape from me. It isn’t dead yet, but it is injured. Yet, as I grab it again, it turns its head and snaps down onto my wrist. With my other hand I punch it in the throat, causing it to release me. I manage to choke it, crushing its furry neck as the second one sinks its teeth in again, this time into my butt.

More loud reports and the second dog stumbles back before stepping forward to attempt a weak strike again. I kicked it in the face, then rotate my other foot to connect with its ribs. A loud crunch is followed by gushing blood, then the dog falls onto the ground.

“Get away.” I tell Barney and Celeste. “There are people inside with guns.”
“Where’s Jess?” Barney asks.
“Go! I can hear them coming down the stairs.”
“Brynne,”
“I don’t know, just go away!” I shout.

I manage to get to my feet… or at least one of them, and hobbled toward the door to try to buy Celeste and Barney more time to get away. As I near the door I take three shots in the chest and thigh.

And in a flash Jess is breaking arms, legs and bodies as she comes from behind to finish off the agents.

“Brynne!” she yells, grabbing me as I begin to fall backwards.
“Jess.” I mumble.

And then things are black.

I am not completely unconscious, but hurt enough that I can’t keep my eyes open. I try to speak but can’t make anything come out. Likewise, trying to move my arms or legs seems to be a waste of time.

Teresa’s voice is the only thing that proves that she is still alive. There

are other voices too. Her family?

A part of me wonders how they are taking all this. Do they really understand what is going on? If there were ever a way to prove to people that unnatural creatures exist, well, this would be it, I guess.

I can feel myself being moved to the car. The voices are fading out as I am carried carefully by Jess. The last thing I can distinctly make out is the sounds of the car doors closing.

Thursday, August 14

I wake to a moaning sound. My own, I think. Then again, maybe not. For all I know the others may have been hurt as well. At least I can tell we are back in the warehouse.

I hurt everywhere. It's like a sharp, burning pain. I'm not entirely sure, but I think that thing took a chunk out of the back of my leg. At least everything still moves.

"You're awake." Teresa says softly.
"My hair hurts." I reply, my voice scratchy.
"Yes," she says, nodding. "Let me get you some water."

She bends over a table and pours water from a pitcher into a glass. Two steps bring her to me, and she holds the glass to my mouth as I reach to take it.

"Thanks."
"How are you feeling?" she asks. She sits on the edge of my bed. "Jess and Celeste thought you'd be out longer."
"Everything hurts." I tell her, choking on the water. "But everything seems to work still."
"That's good to hear." She sighs. "I was so worried, Brynne." She lays her hand on my leg as she turns slightly to look better into my eyes. "Those things were awful."
"Yeah," I say, moving to a sitting position. "And I need to go talk to the others about that."
"Wait," She pushes me back gently with a hand on my shoulder. "You need your rest."
"How can any of us rest with those things around?"
"We're safe enough for now." she says. "Celeste says they don't like the dark."

It's dark? Oh yeah, I can see out the window that it is. Duh. Wow, what time is it? The clock says eleven. I thought that was in the morning.

“How long have I been out?” I ask her. “I have to get moving.”

“You’re staying in bed, love.” She takes a breath and shakes her head. “Honestly, Brynne, with you I can never tell what I should–”

“Where’s Jenna?” I ask. “I need Jenna.”

“Jenna?” she asks, her eyes scrunching together. “Your doll?”

“Uh-huh.” I say. I can feel my face heating as I say it. “I need her. Please.”

“Your doll?” she repeats, sliding from the bed in a huff. “Here’s your doll.”

She snatches Jenna from a chair, where I hadn’t seen her, and slams her onto the bed.

“Have fun with your damn doll!”

She storms off, leaving me alone with Jenna. I tuck her against my side and close my eyes, feeling comforted.

“I missed you.” I whisper.

I am referring to Jenna, but it also applies to Teresa. I have missed her. Even if I saw her only a couple of days ago, I’ve still missed her.

“But I needed you.” I say, ruffling Jenna’s hair. “I wonder what Teresa’s problem is.”

A moment later I hear Teresa mumble that I am awake. Several others are speaking at the same time then, and I slide off the bed to my feet and step carefully toward the others. Everything still hurts and burns. The leg that the dog bit is very stiff and I can barely stand on it.

And who dressed me?

Ugh! I had a wound on my butt. Oh good grief, they saw my butt.

Wonderful.

“Hey, um, everyone.” I say, giving a small wave as I shuffle down the steps.

“You should be in bed.” Celeste says. Her eyes widen and her forehead crinkles in concern.

"Goodness child, you gave me quite a start!" Mrs. Bittel tells me.
"So shorty's a vamp?" Andre says. "That's epic."
"Yeah, so…"

Epic. Yeah.

Okay, I've just decided I really *still* don't like that term, vampire. Not exactly top of my list of things to worry about at this time, I guess.

"So you all, um… know?"
"It was quite a surprise, certainly." Mr. Bittel says, nodding his head, his hand raised out in front of him. "But it would have been hard to miss after that display yesterday."
"Yeah. So, um…" I close my eyes and feel myself wobbling. "What were those things?" I ask.
"I've been working with Barry," Celeste says, pausing to look at the Bittels. "He's one of my former colleagues at the VI."
"The VI are the group who attacked yesterday." Barney explains to them.
"Barry and I think they are something called barghest." Celeste explains.
"Sort of a demon-dog type thing." Barney adds, leaning forward with an eager look on his face.
"Right," she continues. "And they're really mean."
"Got that part." I say, trying hard to make sure my sarcasm is evident. "Where do they come from?"

Seems like an obvious thing. I mean one did tear me apart, practically. One of the rare animals I've ever been scared of. Or at least since becoming what I am now.

"So how do they become clear?" I ask.
"Uh," she stumbles. "Maybe they are like an octopus."
"They didn't have eight arms."
"Chromatophores?" Teresa asks. She looks at me. "We studied them in school. That's the cells that cephalopods use to change their color."
"So maybe they use them to sort of reflect the color of whatever is behind them?" Barney suggests.

I guess that would make sense, on some level. It would have to be extremely advanced for that to work, though. Scary ability, really. I don't know… it just doesn't seem quite right, though. Still, it's a good

enough explanation for now.

"They're extinct." Celeste says. "And… well that's the part we aren't sure of."

They aren't extinct. I was attacked by one just a day ago, and I still feel the effects. I most certainly was not attacked by something that doesn't exist.

Maybe it shouldn't exist.

Maybe it didn't use to exist.

Maybe it never before existed.

But it *clearly* exists now. And I felt its teeth, so I kind of think it must not have just been an illusion.

"We were concerned," Jess says, coming over to stand beside me, and her arm slips around mine to steady me. "They're poisonous."
"That explains the burning." I say.
"It explains why you passed out, right?" Andre asks. "I mean Teresa says your type wouldn't normally pass out from…" he waves his hands around at each of my wounds. "All those."
"She was pretty torn up." Barney says in answer.
"Still is." Jess adds, before turning to me. "We weren't even sure you'd wake up, honey."

Fantastic. Well, I've been poisoned. I wonder if that means I will die from this. And do I really care? I have at times felt as if we all should be destroyed. We aren't natural, and we should not exist. We are a threat to all humans and must be dealt with. Still, do I really want to die?

Not so much, no.

And definitely not until I manage to rid the world from the dangers that Marissa and Miranda pose. Definitely not until I make sure Jess and the others are safe.

"Brynne?" Celeste asks, getting my attention. "Did you hear what I just said?"
"I'm sorry, I was just–"
"She said her friend thinks the barghest was cloned and brought

back." Mrs. Bittel says.
"Oh." I say, shaking my head. "They can do that?"
"The VI apparently can now." Barney tells me. "Or at least some scientists who work with them."
"Wonderful. So these bar… what were they?" I ask.
"Barghest." Celeste answers.
"Right. They are poisonous? So like, will I… I mean–"
"We think you'll be okay now."

I nod and turn away from the others so that they won't see the dampness I feel on my cheek. Embarrassing. Yeah, I really do not want to die. I'm kind of scared.

What will happen to me if I die? Will God forgive my horrible sins? I doubt that. Almost surely I will go to a much warmer place.

God, please give me some time to do good things before I go. Even if Hell is my ultimate destination, I would rather go after saving the people in this room. Please?

"So what's next?" I ask the… well, everyone. Crowd? Group? Bevy?
"We're not sure, love." Teresa says. Ya know, right in front of her parents.

So she's calling me love again. I guess that means we're back together? And her parents seem okay with that idea. At least her mother does, anyway. So I guess that's good.

It's good, right?

"Barney wants to go after them now." Celeste says, though from her tone I can tell she doesn't agree with that assessment.
"Damn right." Barney chimes.
"And what do you think?" I ask. I rub at my face and turn toward the group. "What would you have us do, Celeste? You're the most experienced in these kind of things."

Celeste slumps back in the chair, her face lowered, and hold her right palm to her forehead. Her left hand knots into a fist in her lap and her heels pull from the floor.

"I don't know." she says. "A part of me wants to destroy every vampire, every VI agent, every monster that exists and keep going as long as I can drag air into my lungs." She pauses to take a deep

breath, lowering her hand and looking up into my eyes before continuing. “But mostly, I just want to run, Brynne.”
“Run?” Barney asks. “Run where? Anywhere we run, they’ll just keep killing and torturing people until we show up.”
“I know.” Celeste agrees with a nod. “I don’t have any idea what to do.”
“Pardon me,” Mr. Bittel says. “You’re the most, er, senior person here, and you don’t know? Isn’t there a… a protocol, or a plan for these things?” His eyes dart from face to face before landing back on Celeste. “You worked for them, right? Didn’t they have a plan?”
“I’m sorry Bob, but these two were my first real field work. I’m as new at this as any of you.”
“Any of us except Brynne.” Andre says.

Everyone turns to me, hopeful looks on their faces. So what, now *I’m* supposed to come up with a plan?

Yay.

“I… um…” Great. That’s a start, Campbell, but now what do you follow it with? “I think it’s important that we figure out what to do with you guys.” I tell the Bittels. “And then we need to buy some time to figure out how to find Marissa and Miranda.”
“Do with us?” Mrs. Bittel asks, holding her hand out toward me. “Oh my dear, we must stay here. It’s the safest place to be. We can’t leave Teri here alone, and with them coming after her–”
“Did, um, they explain why… I mean you know they’re only coming after Teresa because–”
“They know.” Teresa says. She shrugs when I look up at her. “There’s nothing any of us can do about it now except try to help.”
“To that end,” Mr. Bittel says. “Should we have weapons? Training of some kind?” He looks to Celeste. “Can’t we at least help defend ourselves against your former comrades?”
“We’ll keep you safe.” I promise.
“All *due* respect young lady, but you don’t seem to be in any shape to protect a kitten from a pup, let alone keep vampires and hellhounds from attacking my family.”

He has a point there.

But still…

“I think we should all get some sleep and discuss this in the morning.” Mrs. Bittel suggests.

Everyone kind of looks around at each other for a moment, then, when nobody objects to that idea, Mrs. Bittel stands and starts toward the stairs.

“Teri, why don’t you come up with me.” she says, making clear it isn’t a question but rather an order.
“Goodnight, love.” Teresa says to me, then follows her mother up the stairs.
“Well junior, looks as though we’ve been relegated to the corner once again.” Mr. Bittel tells his son.

Andre follows his father to a far corner of the room, where it seems someone has set up a makeshift bed area, complete with a blanket to act as a curtain. It looks as if it was used last night as well, though I don’t know how any of them managed to sleep with everything that has been thrown at them.

“This is going to get messy.” Jess says so softly that I am the only one who can hear it.

Saturday, August 16

"This is so boring!" Andre proclaims, slamming his phone down on the sofa. "We've been sitting here doing nothing for days!"
"Two days, 'Dre. Chill." Teresa tells him, not bothering to look up from her book.
"Well I'm so bored that I am considering finding one of those dog things to play fetch."
"Would you be the one throwing the stick, or would you *be* the stick, Andre?" Jess asks him. She has a smile on her face. "Brynne struggled with those things; you'd have no chance."
"You'd be dead inside of three seconds." Teresa tells him. "Best not tempt death quite so blatantly, oh brother o' mine."

Teresa has been absorbing that book for the past four hours. She doesn't even look up, just keeps reading. I don't even know if she is reading it, or just pretending. I think reading. I think.

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere, I agree." Mr. Bittel says. He keeps asking everyone to call him Bob, even though we can't seem to do it.
"Don't complain, dear." Mrs. Bittel tells her husband. "They are trying their best to protect us."
"I'd feel safer if we'd use this as an excuse to visit a place in Barbuda we were looking at."
"Don't you have an extra system?" Andre asks Barney. "Maybe I could spend some time posting on InstaPage."

"Technology is a no-go, man." Barney says. "Sorry. Risky if someone found us. Plus, I don't have a system to spare right now."

"Well damn."

"Calm down, Andre." Mrs. Bittel tells him. "Maybe Brynne or Jessica has another book?" She sits up straight and smiles, bringing her hands together as if she is clapping. "It would be a wonderful opportunity for you to follow your sister's example and catch up on your reading."

"The hounds sound better all the time." he replies under his breath, turning away and slouching as he crosses the room.

Andre paces quickly–back and forth, back and forth–his head shaking, his body physically tense. I think the confinement is getting to him.

"Could this be a problem, you think?" I ask, quietly so that no one other than Jess can understand it.

Despite that, Teresa does look over her book at me. She heard. There is no way she understood, but she recognized the signs that I was talking to Jess privately right in front of everyone. Her eyebrows crinkle down in concentration as she looks from me, then to Jess, then back again. I wave her off and shake my head, mouthing "nothing" to her so she will go back to her book.

"What problem?" Jess asks, as quietly as I had.
"Let's go talk." I say.

We go to the opposite side of the warehouse from the others and find a quiet place between some stacks of old boxes. I lean against the outer wall and turn to Jess.

"He's just nervous." she tells me.
"Yeah, I know. I'm just worried he'll make life miserable for everyone if we end up sitting around here much longer."
"Well we're still waiting on word from Barry. Celeste says he was checking into some leads."
"And meanwhile we just sit here and read about more people being killed in *my* name?" I bang against the wall with my hand, making a hole in the crumbling concrete block.
"To quote Teresa, chill, B." Jess says.

I didn't realize the blocks in this place were so deteriorated. Makes me wonder how safe we are in here. Not just from the building falling in on us–though that too is a danger. I am concerned that the others could burst through the wall if they find us.

"What if he's so agitated that he does something stupid and gets us discovered at just the wrong moment?" I ask.
"I don't know what we can do about it, other than kick him out."
"I don't know. I just wonder if he would feel better if we let him go to a movie or something."
"And get him killed?" she asks. "If he is found they could attack him."
"Or they could follow him back to us." I say, nodding in agreement.

Jess stares into space for a moment, then closes her beautiful eyes. She takes a few deep breaths, then meets my gaze for a moment before turning away again.

“Maybe it would be safe enough for a little double date?” she asks.
“What do you mean?”
“You and Teresa?” she says. She scuffs her toe along the dirty floor. “Maybe Andre and I… we could go watch a movie, grab a pizza, something.”
“You’d do that? To help him out?”
“Yeah. Sure. Why not?”

Her face is turning a dark pink color. Jess is blushing.

“Do you like Andre?!” I say.
“Shhh!” she says, whipping her head around as she waved her hands.
“Seriously?”
“No. Of course not. I just wanted to help calm him down, that’s all.”
“Uh-huh.”
“No. It’s not like that.” she says. She stands up straight and turns to me, giving me a determined look in the face. “He’s cute, but I’m not interested. In the least. I’m starting to think… he’s not my type.”

Right.

Sure.

“Besides honey, it will give you and Teresa a chance to go out. I know you haven’t had a chance since reuniting.”
“We haven’t reunited, exactly.”
“But you want to.” she says, smiling. Then her smile fades, and she takes on a serious tone. “I know how you feel about her, and I know how she feels about you.”
“At least somebody knows.” I mumble.
“Hang in there. You two have the kind of feelings for each other that I desperately long for.”
“And you think Andre is going to be the one you feel that way about?” I ask, smiling.
“Not even a chance.” she says, shaking her head and smiling. “But who knows? I have to feel something for someone, right? I’ll just keep trying new guys until I find the right one.”
“Sorry Jess. I know I make that harder.”

"No, honey, it's these lunatics we are facing who are making it difficult right now. Don't worry about it."

***

My head swivels, eyes darting back and forth, as we approach the theater. We finished dinner at Taco Bell earlier, Teresa still with her face buried in her book as she ate her quesadilla and cinnamon twists.

Several times throughout dinner I tried to start a conversation, but she didn't seem all that interested. And then when she finally did look up and talk, her questions about books by King were impossible for me to answer, which seemed to be her point. She's being extremely distant.

The movie we are going to is one of the Star Wars standalone movies. I remember when the very first Star Wars movie came out, and I was mentioning that and pointing out that it wasn't originally named *A New Hope*, that it wasn't added until a later release, but Teresa seemed completely uninterested. I don't get her. She used to like Star Wars. Now she seems more interested in her book.

"I had this report I did for my English class last year that really got me interested in the backstory of the characters in the books we read." Teresa says to Jess. "Like why are the bullies in the movie IT bullies in the first place, things like that."
"Sounds interesting." Jess replies.
"We had to come up with our own take on things, write part of that backstory ourselves. I wrote one about Hermione's mother's childhood and how she always dreamed of having magical powers."
"Sounds interesting." I say. "I'd love to read it."
"I don't have it anymore." she says quickly, returning to her book, which she even read as we walked.

On the other hand, it only takes two seconds of watching them to see how interested Andre is in Jess.

"Let me get that." he says, rushing ahead to open the door for her. He very obviously did not wait for Teresa or I to go through.
"Thanks." Jess tells him.

And then he smiles and bows awkwardly, before hurrying through beside her, brushing against her arm as he does.

And then he trips.

I let out a quick laugh, unable to help myself. Teresa actually glances up from her book and smiles, before looking back down.

“Nice ‘Dre.” she says.

Jess grips around his upper arm and yanks him back up to his feet. I look around, worried someone might have seen her displaying strength a girl her size should not have.

“You okay there?” Jess asks him.
“Yeah, uh,” he says, face blazing red. “Yes. Thanks.”

Poor guy. That had to be embarrassing. And worst of all, I can tell how little Jessica is interested in him. Just not at all.

The movie is beginning when we enter the theater. We take up seats near the middle, finding the only group of four in a row that are available in the entire place. Jess sits first, then Andre, then Teresa, then me. And Teresa stares straight up at the screen the entire time, never even glancing toward me, even when I stood and went for popcorn at the snack bar, then offered her some when I got back.

Halfway through the movie, during an interesting scene that involves the Millennium Falcon barely escaping a planet before they are captured, my phone vibrates. I reluctantly slide it from my purse and glance down at the screen. A text from Celeste.

May be onto you. Come back asap. B Careful.

“We have to go.” I say softly.

Jess is up, pulling Andre to his feet as I pull Teresa up. Andre’s drink spills, of course, landing on the teen girl in front of him.

“Son of a whore!” she shouts.
“Sorry.” he tells her.
“Sit down!” a man bellows from behind us.
“Out of the way.” A woman next to him says.
“So sorry.” Jess says. “We’re going. Sorry.”

We move into the aisle, trying our best to get out of the way of people as quickly as possible. The girl who took the most of Andre’s drink was also making her way into the aisle, muttering that we owed her

the price of her ticket, because she is going to have to go home now and change.

My eyes land on a man in the back. He is wearing a dark suit, and his fingers were busy texting away as he glances between us and his phone repeatedly. A VI agent.

“VI.” I whisper to Jess. “In back. Only one so far.”
“I see him.” she whispers back. Then to Andre, “Hurry.”

I drag Teresa as fast as I think she can go up the aisle, toward the exit. One more suited figure steps aside and smiles as we go past, feigning innocence and smiling as if he were just a theater patron who was rising to use the restroom or refill his drink. I elbow him lightly as I pass, nudging him out of the way, and he stumbles backward and lands in his seat with an “oof.”

No suits in the lobby. Only two other people at all, and they are employees. But outside are five women and two men, all extremely beautiful, save for their all-black eyes. They turn to us and their faces all tense and contort in scowls.

“Stay out of the way!” I tell Teresa and Andre, and I turn to face the beautiful monsters, whatever they are.

They are quick. Not as quick as Jess or I, but quick. I manage to avoid the first two, but the third gets a death grip on my wrist that I cannot shake off.

And it hurts.

I grab onto her arm, and she lets out a shriek that sends pain all the way down to my spine. I spin her around and toss her into two others, knocking them all three to the concrete. Then I turn to see that Jess has managed to take down all four of the others.

“Come on!” I tell Teresa and Andre, and they come.
“What were those things?” Andre asks, and we hurry to the car.
“No idea.” I say.
“Look.” Jess says, gesturing back at them.

There on the concrete are seven model-gorgeous people, all of whom appear to be mid twenties, all of whom cry from their perfectly normal eyes. Several of them have broken bones jutting through an

arm or leg, and all of them look as if they have been the victims of some awful attack by something vicious.

Sunday, August 17

Early mornings never meant a lot to me. I can stay awake for long periods of time, so three or four a.m. is fine with me. But Teresa's family, as well as Barney and Celeste, all look like they could use a big coffee.

"Lamia?" Celeste asks. "Yeah, okay. See you soon, Barry."

She hangs up the phone and grabs onto her bag. We have all packed up what we need and have spent a little time deciding where to go next. Clearly staying in this area is not going to work, but we didn't want to make a bad and unprepared decision and hurry from this mess into an even worse one.

"What's a lamia?" Barney asks.
"In mythology they are child eating beasts." Teresa answers. "We studied mythology in my English class."
"Not far from the truth." Celeste tells her. "They seem to be exactly that: cannibals. Or rather, they eat humans. I have no idea if they eat each other."
"So we have yet another evil monster we need to exterminate. Great." I say.
"All we really know is that they all seem to be beautiful, they are really strong, and they like to eat humans. Especially young humans."
"And their eyes turn black when they are angry." Jess adds.
"Why young humans?" Andre asks.
"Because, my dear," Celeste says, shoving him toward the door. "You taste better."
"Glad you think this is so funny." he replies, scooping his own bag as we pass by it.

We are heading to some place in Texas. Not exactly my favorite part of the country, based on experiences, but I can deal with it. It just gets really, really dry and hot. At least the part I was in did.

According to Celeste, Barry will meet us there. His time with the VI is

done. He is saving all the data he can find, then getting out of there while he still can. They are sending more and more people on Marissa and Miranda's errands now, and he doesn't want anything to do with any of it.

At least not on their side of things, anyway.

We go out to the cars, both Barney's van and the sedan the Bittels have, and load our bags. Barney's cache of weapons in the van catches Andre's eye, and he comes over for a look.

And that's when it gets him.

A vampire. He is burly, weighing at least three hundred pounds and built like a football player. He has his mouth clamped onto Andre's shoulder before Andre can even scream out.

"'Dre!" Teresa screams.

Jess immediately has her arms around the vampire's neck, trying hard to pull him free from Andre, and I grab onto the body below, pulling to the side. The creature flings me away with a shove, but Jess is not letting go so easily. Before long Barney is in on things, holding a large pistol against the vampire's head. I grab onto the vampire again, just as Barney fires his gun and obliterates the top of the skull, and the vampire goes limp.

"You're going to be okay." I tell Andre, my ears ringing from the gunshot.
"What?!" he shouts, grabbing at his shoulder. "I'm not going to be one of you, am I?"
"No." I say.
"What?"
"I say no." I repeat loudly.
"Oh." he says, nodding. "This'll get better soon, right?" he asks Barney.
"Beats me, man," Barney tells him, "First time I shot someone."

The vampire begins to twitch on the ground. He is down, but he is not dead. Jess and I look at each other, and I can see that she also knows the thing will be back up and fighting again if we don't do something.

"You watch out for his buddies." I tell her. "I'll take care of this."
"Right." she says, nodding.

There is a shovel in the back of the van. I pull it out and make my way back to the twitching body. I place the shovel against his neck, then look up at the Bittels, who are staring at me with their eyes wide.

“You may want to look away.” I tell them.
“Dear Lord, protect us and forgive us.” Mrs. Bittel says, before turning her head.
“Cool.” Andre says.

With a hard thrust downward, I remove the head from the body, ending the twitching and the vampire’s wretched existence forever.

“We have to get out of here.” I say.
“Yes, quite.” Mr. Bittel says, adding a solemn nod. “Of course.”
“Jess will go with you.” I tell them. “One of you will need to ride with us.”
“Teri, go with them.”
“Why do I have to go? Why not ‘Dre?” she whines.
“Don’t argue with me, young lady.”
“Fine.” she mumbles, starting to trudge toward the van.

***

Four hours into the drive and Teresa has not says a word. Even when we stop at the gas station and I ask if she needs to use the restroom she just shakes her head. She still reads that book, though there is no way she is reading that slowly.

“I don’t understand.” I say to her. We are in the car alone now, having stopped a second time so everyone would be able to use the restroom and to get snacks.
“What?” she ask.
“You can talk!” I say. “I don’t understand why you’re ignoring me.”
“I’m not.”
“Then why don’t you even talk to me? I thought we were okay.”

She doesn’t answer, except to shrug. And still she doesn’t look up from that stupid book. It’s only two inches thick, it can’t be taking that long to read!

“Did I do something wrong?”
“Huh!” she says. She finally puts her book down on the seat beside her. “Brynne, we didn’t talk for a year, then–”

“You wouldn’t talk to me!”
“Because I was trying to forget you!”
“I know that.”
“Then why did you come back?”
“Why? To save your life.”
“Well, love, you’re doing a great job of it.”

She’s glaring at me, her eyes burning holes into my soul. Yes, I’m putting her in a lot of danger. I’ve done my best to fix that, though. I really wish I had never met her. Only because she could die because of it. And because… just because.

“I’m sorry.” I say. “I’m doing my best to keep you and your family as safe as possible.”
“Well that sucks as an answer, and you know it.”
“What in the world is that supposed to–”
“And putting yourself at unnecessary risk!?” she says.

That catches me off guard. What does she even mean with that? Yeah, of course I’m putting myself at risk to save her. Because I put her in danger in the first place.

Tears? I’ve made her so angry that she is crying now? What is this defiant attitude now, anyway? She was never like this before. She has changed so much. Grown up, maybe? Yeah, grown up. But… but this isn’t defiance, is it?

“What is this?” I ask her.
“What is what?” she asks, looking down at her fumbling hands. “You don’t have to protect me.”
“Yes I–”
“Why?”
“Because I’m the whole reason–”
“There’s a way to keep me safe and to keep yourself safer at the same time.”
“Teresa, I don’t think–”
“But I’m not good enough for that, am I?”
“No, that’s not–”
“Not good enough to make… immortal, or whatever. Not good enough to protect my family, not good enough to protect you, not… not as good as Jess?”
“I never said–”
“You did.”

Not good enough. Not as good as Jess? Where in the world is this coming from. I never said that. Not once. The only thing I ever said is that I don't want her to be changed, to be a vampire, or whatever I am.

"I just don't want you to have to live the tortured life I have to." I tell her.
"Like Jess does?"
"It's a lonely li–"
"It doesn't have to be!"
"Teresa, I'm a *monster*. Don't you get that? I'm not going to turn you into–"
"You're not a monster, Brynne. Only one's actions can make one a monster. Your actions… your *heart* prevents you from being the monster you so fear being."
"Okay, but even still… I just don't want you t–"
"You don't want me."

Is that what she thinks? That I don't want her. That I don't love her still, don't care about her, don't want to see her each and every day.

"And I understand that. I've always thought you cared more about Jessica than anyone–"
"I love you." I say. "Still. Always."
"Do you really?" she asks.

I have to close my eyes to try to control myself, to keep myself from bawling like I feel. I do love her. Always will. Always have.

"Yes." I tell her.
"But you don't want to be with me now."
"It doesn't matter," I say, shrugging. "You made your feelings clear."
"Did I? Well, it turns out I have no idea what I want, okay?"
"You mean…" She still wants to be with me? "What *do* you mean?"
"I don't know." She says, sighing. "I'm sixteen, not thirty."
"And you want to be sixteen for the next fifty centuries?"
"Dang, who wouldn't?" she asks, laughing. "To never be old."
"It's not a good enough reas–"
"That's not why I want it." she says, reaching for her book.
"Why do you want it, then?"
"To protect my family."
"I'll protect your family. I swear."

“To protect you.” she whispered, opening her book and looking into it.

She keeps saying that. I don’t need protection, though. And it doesn’t even matter if they get me.

“If they kill me then your family should be safe. They don’t care about your family, they’re just using all of you to get to me.”

“That’s not what I meant.” she mumbles, reaching up to wipe at her cheek. “To protect *you*.”

“I just says–”

“I still care about you, okay?”

She still cares about me? There. It’s said. I hoped. I prayed. I wanted so much to know that she still cares.

“Are you saying… you want to get back together?”

“No.” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t kn–”

“I just don’t know yet, okay? I… I was with Lisa, and now I just don’t know. I’m sixteen. I need time.”

“Time for what?”

“To figure it all out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“But I still… ya know? And I don’t think…” She paused to close her book and wipe her face again. “I can’t handle you not being… alive, ya know.”

“I’ll try not to die.”

“You know that isn’t what I’m saying.”

I know. I know she thinks it would solve everything if I just changed her into what I am. If I just cursed her to live this life I live. But I can’t do that. I won’t do that. It would be incredibly wrong to do that.

How do I not do that?

Monday, August 18

We arrive at the farmhouse we are going to be holing up in early in the morning. Everyone is exhausted, and we sort of just go inside and crash. I take first watch, but I honestly feel pretty safe. The house is on a hill, and the surrounding land is nearly bare. It would be very difficult for anyone to sneak up on us.

Barry isn't here yet. We stay in the upstairs bedrooms to add just a tiny amount of protection, but it doesn't seem necessary. I have a really, really boring night. I watch all the sides of the house as well as I can, and I don't see so much as a moth.

"Your turn." I tell Jess.

She was awake anyway, I could tell. She has been tossing and turning all night, making her cute little pants of frustration at her inability to sleep. And now it is my turn to toss and turn while I try to sleep.

"Yeah, I guess." she says, appearing at my side almost instantly. "Get some sleep, honey."
"I hope to."
"Yeah, well I hope you have better luck than I did."
"Too quiet?" I ask, smiling at the thought.
"No. Just… feeling down, I guess."
"About what?"

She shrugs, then nudges me off the seat I have been in. One bedroom has a view of three sides of the house, and that's where Jess tried to sleep and where I had spent a majority of my watch, only taking a quick trip to the other end of the hall to look out the other side every few minutes. Well, and one bathroom break.

"Just stuff." she says, sighing and staring out the window. She picks at the leg of her jeans. "Am I going to be like this forever, Brynne?"
"You will age, just slowly." I tell her, patting her shoulder.
"No, I know that. I mean… never mind."

“What?”
“Nothing. Get some sleep.”

Right, ‘cause I needed more to worry about. Now I have to wonder what it is that is bothering Jessica. Yay me.

Why must life be so difficult?

***

Three hours of my own sleeplessness and I decide to get up. The others are talking downstairs, anyway. I heard Celeste telling Barney that her friend Barry should be here by now.

“How is everything going?” I ask, taking a seat on the sofa in the living room.
“Not good.” Celeste replies. “I can’t get Barry.” She holds up her phone and wiggles it. “And he was supposed to be here when we got here. Something isn’t right about that. He isn’t like that.”
“Oh yay, another problem.”
“Must be a day that ends in y.” Barney says in agreement.

It’s true: every single day things get more and more complicated. And I can already see on the screen of Barney’s computer that there have been more killings.

“How many?”
“A lot.” he says. “Fourteen in the last day.”
“You’ve made the news, my dear.” Mrs. Bittel says. She sits a steaming cup of tea in front of me. “Picture and all.”
“Pic– what do you mean?”
“Let me show you.” Barney says. He switches the tab on his browser. “Looks like security camera picture from Alaska, maybe?” he asks.

The side of my face is on the screen, my red hair reflecting the overhead lights from the airport. It makes no sense that they would have this, and it worries me.

“Any pics of Celeste?” I grab at the teacup and realize my hands were shaking. “She was with me most of the time there.”
“None that I’ve seen yet.”
“Do you think anybody would recognize me in public?”
“Tiny girl with flaming red hair who is accused of being the teenage leader of a mass murdering drug gang?”

“Not to mention the million dollar bounty.” Celeste adds.
“Not a chance you won’t be recognized.” Barney finishes.
“Great. So I guess I can’t go out in public anymore.”

Because it’s Monday, right? I’ve lived a century and a half and I have hated every single Monday of it.

“Perhaps you could dye your hair, dear?” Mrs. Bittel suggests.

I’ve tried to dye my hair before, and the results weren’t good. It didn’t take. My hair wound up just a slightly darker shade of red. I was going for a dark chestnut. Of course that was a lot of years ago.

The seventies were an odd decade for me.

“I can try, I guess. But someone has to go get it for me.”
“I would be happy to take Teresa to town to select something for you. If possible, I’d love to pick up some Chinese takeout while we’re there.” Mrs. Bittel says, her face looking excited.
“That’s not a good idea.” I stand and head outside, pausing at the door. “I’ll check to see if Jess can go. They don’t have a picture of her, right?”
“Well no, but I’m perfectly willing to go for you, dear.”
“It isn’t safe, Mrs. Bittel. I’m sorry.”
“Alright.” She swallows and nods, the light in her eyes disappearing. “It’s just Sabrina, Brynne.”

***

Several hours later, and *two* bleachings to get the red out as much as possible, then dye from a bottle, administered by Mrs. Bi… Sabrina, I’m now a brunette.

It seems weird.

I don’t think I like this. I feel different. Not in a good way. It seems like I lost something important, and it still doesn’t look as brown as I’d like. There’s still a red undertone.

“I still look like me.” I brushed my hair over to one side to try a different style. “People will still recognize me.”
“Nonsense, dear.” Sabrina tells me.
“Are you sure?”
“Perfectly.”

“Okay.” I say. I brushed my hair back to the usual style. “If you say so.”

I go into the living room to see what the others think. Celeste looks at me, nods, but doesn’t say anything. Teresa glances up from her book, but immediately goes right back to it.

“Looks good.” Andre says.
“Yes, that should shield your identity sufficiently.” Mr. Bittel tells me. “What say you, Barney?”
“Hm?” Barney ask. He glances my way. “Oh, yeah, that looks different.” He hesitates. “Two more killings today. Every channel is telling people to stay inside to avoid the gang violence spreading across our country. It’s getting ugly.”
“We have to do something.” I mumble.
“And Barry still hasn’t been heard from.” Celeste tells me, stopping her pacing long enough to look out the window.

She’s right, something is definitely wrong. If I wouldn’t have ever come into Jessica’s life things would be so different. But I did, and because of that, I stuck around when I should have run from what was going on in Wichita. And that led me to the VI, which led me to the Satan Sisters.

It’s all Alejandro’s fault, and I hate him for it.

“Think he sold us out?” Andre asks her after a long moment of silence.
“Not a chance. I’d trust Barry with my life and every life here.” she tells him, stalking toward him as she speaks. “And don’t you ever let me hear you questioning him again.”
“You did trust him with all our lives.” Barney says. “Not that you had much choice.”

She nods, and looks out the window again.

Andre is right about that, though. She has trusted him with all our lives, not that we’ve had a lot of choice. We had to have some information from someone, and nobody else was going to step forward.

I step toward the door, planning to head out to see if Jess is around, but Barney reaches a hand out and stops me. He shakes his head and implores me with his eyes to not go.

“What?” I ask.

God, please don’t let this be another problem arising. I can’t take any more right now. Please.

“Just leave her be for a while, huh?” he says, nodding toward the porch.

Which totally worked.

Because of course it did.

I pull away from him and hurry through the door, casting about to find Jess. She isn’t in the expected place along the edge of the porch, and I can’t see her anywhere around.

Think, Campbell, think.

Okay, so… no sounds from the front of the house. I wouldn’t hear her if she was very far away, anyway. But also no sounds from the east. There are sounds of small animals scurrying around on the west side, though.

I step off the porch and head toward the east. My brows pull in as I puff out my cheeks in thought.

Should I listen to Barney and leave her alone for now?

But what if something serious is wrong? I can’t exactly put everyone at risk just because Barney thinks Jess needs some time alone, can I? And why would Jess need time alone?

This can’t be good.

I see Jess sitting atop a fence about a hundred feet from the house, staring out into the field. I can feel myself smiling as I pick up my pace. Thank God she is okay.

But as I approach she doesn’t turn toward me, even though I know for a fact that she heard me coming. Her eyes finally dart toward me, then back into the distance, and she runs a hand through her hair as she blows air out.

“How’s it going?” I ask, looking out into the field where she watches.

“Alright, I guess.” she says. She giggles and shrugs. “Yeah, doing fine.”
“Really?” I ask. I turn toward her. “Um… Jess?”
“Yeah, honey?” she asks, her eyes darting quickly to me then away again.
“You just seem… I dunno, like something is wrong.” Like really tense, honestly.
“Nope, doing great.”

Doing great. Well, I can’t really argue with her until I know more. I may as well move on.

“Barry hasn’t shown up yet, and Celeste is starting to give up hope I think.”
“Fantastic.” she says.
“Yeah, fantastic.” I say. I sigh and sit beside her. “We can’t sit here forever. A lot of people are dying because of me.”

I suck. And not in a vampire on television kind of way. More in a bad person and cause of all the problems that are happening right now kind of way.

“We can sit around and wait a few days.” Jess tells me. “It’s better than making plans and those be bad plans.”
“I know.” It’s what we keep saying, at least.
“Besides, you can hang out with Miss Perfect in there, right?”
“With who?”
“Your girl.” she says, glancing over briefly. “You’ve been whining about wanting to be with her for forever, honey. Now you are.”
“Sort of, anyway.” I mumble. How ‘together’ we are I’m not so sure. Or how together we should be.
“Well sort of is better than no chance at all.” Her jaw clenches. I *hear* her jaw clench. “If she doesn’t see how great you are, if she doesn’t love you the way you are, then I…” She slams her mouth shut and turns to look at me, her eyes locking onto mine. “Then I don’t think she deserves you.”

Her face is red with anger. Or with embarrassment, maybe? Over what she just said, I guess? Or almost said. Like she was about to go off on Teresa, maybe.

“Anyway,” I say, while picking at the edge of my jeans. “It looks like we’ll be sitting around here for at least one more day.”
“Yeah.” she says. “Hair looks great, honey.” she says.
“You really think so?” I run my hand through it. I’m still not

convinced that it helped.
“Very pretty.” She tells me, looking away.
“Thanks, Jess.”

Wednesday, August 20

I've been out patrolling around the farm half the night. Nothing. Not so much as a footprint. There have been a few confused looking bobcats, a handful of snakes, and one lonely deer, but no people or other human-like creatures, such as lamia, vampires, striga, etc.

Until there is.

Time slows. I feel my scalp contracting, my hair standing on end. I don't want to move toward it, but I have to.

And then time flies, as I approach. I feel sweat running down the back of my legs, and I sway as I stand over a human body.

Not good.

I should be running.

Why am I not running?!

Because I need to find out who this is and why they are here. I need to find out what happened to him. Yes, a him. A man with a very dark complexion, wearing a suit and tie. A man with half of the top of his head missing, one foot gnawed off, and a gun wound on his left hand.

I bend forward, and I notice the awful smell for the first time. I roll him on his side and check his back pockets for ID, but don't find any. Inside his jacket pocket pocket I finding an ID.

"I'm so sorry, Barry." I whisper.

I turn and race toward the house as quickly as I can, startling a flock of geese who are grazing near a small pond. I guess Jess heard the geese, because by the time I make it to the house she is coming through the front door, her eyes bulging. Her hair is such a mess that it can only mean that she had been in bed. That also explains why her

shirt is off by one button.

“Brynne?” she asks. “What’s wrong, honey?”
“Barry’s dead!” I pant. “They’re here.”

After two minutes explaining to the others, all the while watching out the windows and gathering every weapon Celeste and Barney had prepared for us, the others are up and ready to run. We have them gathered in the living room, which is the most vulnerable room, yes, but also has the most escape routes.

“Are you sure it was Barry?” Celeste finally asks.
“Checked his ID.” I tell her.

I pause to take a breath, wipe the sweat that is pouring off my face, and try to slow the heart that is running an uphill marathon and threatening escape from my chest.

They’re all going to die. Every last one of them. Maybe I can escape–maybe even Jessica–but pretty much everyone here will die. Even Teresa.

“They might ambush us when we head out.” Barney suggests.
“Which is why you should have changed me.” Teresa complains.
“Hey!” Jess snaps at her. She grinds her teeth together in a scowl as she stomps toward Teresa, her hand raised to point. “If it weren’t for her trying to save your silly, petty, undeserving little ass then we wouldn’t be in this mess.” she growls.
“Me?!” Teresa says, holding her hands up and backing away.
“Yes you!” Jess snaps. “So shut up and do as your told. Or not. You can just screw up and die for all I care, you whiny, stuck up little–”
“Jess!” I grab her shoulder. “Back off.”

She turns and looks at me, her eyes widening. Her mouth falls open and color drains from her face. Then she nods and steps back.

“Useless brat.” Jess mumbles, glancing up at Teresa.

Jess turns and stomps away, to the front door, where she pokes her head out and looks around.

“Sorry.” I tell Teresa. “Now isn’t the time for this conversation.”
“Well why the hell not, young lady?” Mr. Bittel says. “Looks to me like you could use an army right now.”

“Bob, it’s extremely complicated.” Celeste says.
“I don’t see how.” he paces her direction and tugs at his belt, which apparently has become uncomfortable. “We’re all in danger as long as we have to rely on the likes of these two…” His head turns so his eyes can take in both me and Jess. “Nice young women.” he finishes. “If we were strong in our own right then–”
“Never going to happen, Bob old boy.” Barney tells him.
“I don’t see why not?” he says. He looks around the room. “I think we’d all go along with it. I’m not crazy about the idea of drinking blood–”
“Dear lord!” Sabrina says.
“But I think I’d enjoy not having to fear for my life every moment of the day.”
“It won’t fix that.” I tell him. “*I* still fear for my life.”
“Yes, but–”
“I’m sorry, I just can’t.” I tell him. I step toward Jessica. “And besides, it takes a long time to recover afterward. We can’t right now.”

Jess and I do a trip around the house, checking for… well, anything. I have this weird trembling in my legs that I haven’t ever felt, at least not quite like this. I just want to scream. And I have to pee. Like, badly.

Maybe I could just call up Marissa and tell her to bring it on. Right here, right now. We could take them. I’m sure we could. Of course we could.

Except we totally couldn’t.

Is it seriously not even six yet? Ugh. I thought it was like noon. Though, to be honest, I’m sort of glad I don’t have to worry about the bright light burning us right now. At least it was cloudy yesterday. Can’t expect it to be like that every day.

“You okay?” Jess asks.
“Yeah, huh.” I say. “Why? Do I sound like something is wrong? Why would something be wrong? Do I look like I have something wrong with me?”
“Uh, yeah. And you were, I don’t know, whimpering.”
“Seriously?” I ask. I can’t help it, I laugh. I actually stop in my tracks and laugh. “Okay, well, I *do not* whimper.”
“Sure, okay.” she says. “Let’s get everyone into the cars. It looks clear for now.”

I nod, and we do one last circuit around the house and then go inside. Barney is just loading up one last gun, which he hands to Mr. Bittel.

"Everyone ready?" I ask.
"Let's do this." Barney says.
"Shit yeah." Andre says.
"'Dre!" Teresa shouts, while both parents also shout his name out. He shrugs.
"We need to hurry this along." Jess tells them. "Barney, need help carrying anything?"
"Think we got it covered." he says, nodding.
"Then everyone head out." Jess says, motioning toward the door. She takes a second to glare at Teresa for some reason before she steps through the door herself.

What is up with her? I'm getting sick of whatever it is, and I didn't even know there was anything until a few minutes ago. Though, in retrospect, there must have been something that happened with her and Teresa at some point, because I think there were times when she would clench her jaw as she was smiling and saying nice things about her, and she seemed very eager to point out Teresa's flaws at times. I always thought it was just her trying to prepare me and guard me from heartbreak, but maybe the two haven't ever gotten along as well as I thought. Maybe they've never liked each other. At least, maybe Jess has never liked Teresa.

"Who's in which car?" Andre ask.
"I'll ride in whichever car Jessica is not in." Teresa says softly. She *still* has that stupid book.
"We're all going in one car." I tell them. "Everyone in the van."
"Brynne dear," Sabrina says, "Won't that be a little–"
"It'll be incredibly cramped." I tell her. "It also keeps us all together for safety. All the guns and all the monsters in one place."
"Only *one* monster." Teresa mumbles.
"There is no call for that, Teri." Mr. Bittel tells her.

One last patrol to make sure things are clear, then we all pile in. Jess and I have our extra strong vision at work as we scan the road, bushes, trees, everything to make sure that there are no lamia, barghest, VI or vampires awaiting us.

Life is strange, that's for sure.

We are five miles from the farm and all looks clear. No creatures in

the trees, no cars following us, nothing.

And then my phone rings.

Marissa.

“Hello Marissa.” I say into the phone. This is stupid. I’ve had a history of falling prey to her verbal manipulations before.
“What the hell are you doing?!” Celeste asks, grabbing at the phone.
“Brynne! Oh how have you been? You wouldn’t believe how much I’ve missed you.”
“I bet.” I say.
“Did you get my gift?” she asks.

A gift. Is that what Barry is? A man’s life is meaningless to her, she’s only interested in snaring me. And maybe I *should* just hand myself over to her, but I don’t think that would accomplish what I want it to. Sure, maybe it would ensure my friends get away, but what about the thousands of people they continue killing over the years that follow?

“This has to end, Marissa.” I tell her.
“So you did?” she asks. “Excellent! I was told you had, but you know how hard it is to find good help.” She laughs a high, delighted laugh. “Maybe you don’t. Let me tell you, it’s tough. They always have their own personal vendettas to pursue. You give someone power and money and what do they do? They go back to their hometown and slaughter the mailman instead of finding the girl who killed Alejandro.” She says that last with a snarl in her voice.
“Where are you, Marissa.”
“Oh you don’t know yet, do you?” she asks, laughing again. “Oh Brynne, you may be a ten on the outside, but sometimes I think that’s your IQ as well.”
“Why don’t you enlighten me, Marissa.” I say. I draw in a slow, steady breath. “We can end this if you do.”
“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she asks, laughing. “But this is so much more fun.”
“Mar–”
“And I’m having a good time filling out the party list, anyway.” she says.

She cackles like a witch, I kid you not. And then she makes a kissing sound into the phone, then hangs up.

I lower the phone to my lap and close my eyes, take slow breaths and

try to calm myself. The others are talking, but I manage to almost completely shut them out for a moment as I calm myself.

And then I relay the entire conversation to the others. Sabrina looks horrified, and actually cries. Teresa keeps looking at her book. Andre and Mr. Bittel listen raptly, casting regular glances back and forth at each other.

“She’s evil.” Sabrina says, her voice shaking. “The devil herself.”
“Hence the title Satan Sisters.” Barney agrees, nodding, though his eyes never leave the road.
“Dear Lord Jesus save us.” she says solemnly.
“What did you make of that conversation?” Celeste asks me. “It had to mean something.”
“I think she just wanted to brag.” I tell them.
“Or goad you into making a mistake.” Jess suggests.
“Goad?” Barney says. The side of his face slides up in a smile. “You sound like Mom, Jess.” His smile fades. “Damn I miss her.”

There is a long silence after that. Jess looks out the window, and it seems as if all her energy has drained away. Sabrina reaches out her hand, and it looks as if she is going to touch Jessica’s shoulder, but it wavers, then returns to her lap.

I wish I could take away Jess and Barney’s pain. I would willingly suffer through it for them if I could. But my pain, instead, is to suffer on my own and to suffer by watching the people I care about most in the world suffer.

“Fill out the party list?” Teresa says. She lowers the book slightly, her eyes meeting mine over the top. “What does that mean?”
“Teri, stay out of this.” her father tells her.
“That’s a good question.” I say.
“Yeah, well,” Jess says. She snorts. “It’s an *obvious* question.”
“I didn’t hear you asking it.” Andre says.
“Unlike little-miss-entitled here, I don’t find it necessary to verbalize every last thought that floats into my head.”
“It is a good question, though.” Celeste says.

It is. So what did she mean by that? Please don’t tell me they are waiting for yet another monster of some kind to show up before they attack us again. Please.

“If I were to hazard a guess,” Mr. Bittel says. He looks from Celeste to

me, stopping at me and looking every bit as if he were waiting for my permission to continue. I nod. “It sounds to me as though the lady is gathering her supporters. What better way to take down a… vampire, if I may, than by using a group of vampires to attack them.”
“Seems logical.” Barney agrees.
“The question is what we do about it.” Celeste says.
“Far be it from me to presume to be worthy, but you have a willing army right here in this very car, dear girl.” Mr. Bittel tells me. “You have but to ask.”
“We aren’t fighters, Bob.” Sabrina tells him.
“We have to protect the kids, Sabrina. How better to accomplish that than to become that which we wish to escape?”
“I said no!” I tell him. “Why is it that nobody takes me seriously?”
“Brynne,” Jess says, leaning over to touch my arm. “We could use the help at this point.”

I’m tired of this. Tired of everyone questioning my decisions until I give in and do things their way.

“If you think it’s such a great idea then *you* do it, Jessica.” I tell her. I turn my back to everyone and stare out the tinted window. “I won’t be a part of any of it.”

Thursday, August 21

We stop near Pratt Kansas for the night, choosing to stay the evening in a rundown motel. It is old, gross, and incredibly cheap, but it is a place to lay down, and we can shower, as long as we don't mind the rusty water.

"Company." I hear Jess say outside our rooms. "Just one."

I jump to my feet and step outside to where she is. A large, angry looking vampire is standing across the highway from us. He has a green plaid shirt and a seventies rocker vibe going, and his large, mullet-covered head is tilted to one side as he seems to contemplate Jess and I. He looks back and forth at the traffic, then slowly paces across the road to our parking lot.

"Go away, now." Jess tells him.

He pauses and looks at us again. Having decided we were no threat, apparently, he holds his hands in the air in a give up gesture and steps slowly toward us once again.

"You're the girl." he says loudly, his mustache twitching. His floppy mullet waves as he nods. "Yes, you are! Your hair is different, but you're her."
"What do you want?" I ask.
"Peace." he replies. "I only want to live my life in peace. Right now I can't do that." he shakes his head and wipes at his face. "There have been some of our kind around agitating for a fight."
"Why would they want to fight you?" Jess asks.
"Not me, man, just people. They wanna create a group to fight people. Humans."

Fight humans? Oh you have got to be kidding me! Now she has plans to fight normal humans? To what end? How could that accomplish anything other than alerting everyone in the world that vampires actually do exist, and that we're to be feared and exterminated.

Or to draw me and Jess out. Because it would definitely draw me and Jess out.

“Wha… what do you expect me to do about it?” I ask.
“You?” he asks. He smiles wide and raises his arms, stretching them out in what seems menacing at first, then seems excited. “Not you, man!”

Twelve.

Yes, there are twelve.

Twelve more vampires, and I think a large regular human, emerge from the woods. Some come shuffling, their eyes downcast, pausing part of the way and looking back at the trees as if they are not sure this is a good idea. And some smile and strut right up, eyes locked on us.

“Us, man!” the first guy says. He throws his head back and laughs. “Us!” He reaches out and nudges my shoulder. “We heard a you, ya know? Did some diggin’ and heard a you.”
“Heard of–”
“You’re the girl don’t kill people.” He says, his face taking on a more serious look. “You don’t set out to hurt others, man. That’s big. That’s with us.”
“Uh…” I say, but I don’t know how to follow that. I turn toward Jess and she looks as confused as I am.
“Oh man,” the guy says, shooting his hand out toward me. “I’m here shittin’ myself and ain’t taken to the intros, man. Forget my damn fool head if it weren’t glued on, man. I’m Bud Lansdown.”

He grabs at my hand and starts a shaking motion, smiling and looking into my face. He seems to shrink before my eyes, seems to become almost… I don’t know, subordinate, or something.

“Jessica Sloan.” Jess tells him, extending her hand to him so he can repeat the move with her.
“I’m Brynne Campbell.” I tell him.
“Yeah,” he nods, his eyes darting back to me. “We *know* who you are.”

Suddenly the others are filing past, all wanting to introduce themselves and shake. It takes a minute, and I still feel dazed and

have no clue what the heck is going on. All I know is that Bud seems to be their leader.

“We’re ready.” Bud tells me.

I look to Jess to see if she understands what is going on *at all*. She doesn’t seem to. So it is up to me.

“Ready for what, Mr. Lansdown?” I say.
“Bud,” he says. “And ready to *fight,* man!”
“You want to… fight?”
“Damn straight!” he shouts, and the others agree.
“Fight who?” Jess asks.
“Whoever Brynne needs us to fight. Give us our marching orders and we’ll jump, you just wait and see, man.”
“Orders?” I say.

He nods. And a scan of the small crowd gathered nets more nods all around. Many smiles meet my gaze, and even those not smiling seem to nod along with Bud.

Orders? They expect me… to give them orders?

“I don’t… understand, Bud.” I say after a moment.
“Volunteers, man!” he says, throwing his hands up to the sky. “Militia!”
“Freedom fighters.” someone else says.
“Yeah, man, freedom fighters!” Bud echoes.
“Freedom from what, though?” I ask.

Bud and the twelve others look around at each other and smile, as if I had told a really hilarious joke but didn’t quite understand my own joke.

It isn’t the first time I’ve witnessed that look at my expense.

“Freedom from their kind, man.” Bud says. “Freedom from *feeders*, ya know, man?”
“Feeders?” Jess asks him. Her shoulders tighten, as if she suddenly is very scared.
“Yeah, man. And from those who hunt us.”
“We just want to live our lives in peace.” a woman from the group says.
“By peace do you mean you don’t, like, attack people?” I ask.

“No way, man! That’s monstrous.” Bud answers for the group, the rest nodding along in affirmation.
“So you… I mean, where do you get your blood?” I ask.

The question out, I let my brain wander. There was a time in my life that I worked hard to find more like myself. Not long ago, I did believe that I was the last when Alejandro says we were the last two, and then he died. Or I thought he had died, anyway. All along there have been more out there. More that are vicious, for sure, but also… more that didn’t hurt people to survive?

“Wherever we have to, man.” Bud says. “Judy gets part of hers from Mika over there.” Bud says. He leans forward and whispers in a conspiratorial tone. “They’s been married since before she turned, ya know, man.”
“Blood banks?” Jessica asks.
“For sure, man.” he says, his mustache twitching up in a smile. “Mostly, in fact.”
“Animals?” I ask.
“Hell no!” one of the guys says. “They taste like shit and don’t do a damn thing to sustain you.”

Okay, that much is basically true. Human blood is the only thing that will keep us going. We don’t need it every day or anything, but we do need it every few weeks. Regular food does okay in the middle, though.

I especially like french fries lathered in ketchup.

“You don’t drink from people?” I ask.
“None ‘cept those who agree, like Mika there.” Bud says. He shrugs. “Wouldn’t be right otherwise.”
“We’re good people!” one of the women protests loudly.

Okay.

I believe them.

I really do, amazingly. It seems like I shouldn’t trust anyone anymore, but I do trust that they are telling me the truth for some reason. Why would they lie?

To kill you at the Satan Sisters’ command?

Well, yeah, there's that. You need to be careful, Campbell. You can't just trust anyone who comes along and claims to be a gentle vampire. Not even the ones who use the word 'man' too many times, man.

Still, they could have just attacked us and wiped us out. They have us overwhelmed, outnumbering us by so much, so they could have. So they must be telling the truth.

"So what do you know, Bud?" Jess asks.
"A lot." he says. "Let's grab a beer somewheres and have a chat, man."

Saturday, August 23

After a long discussion--two of them, actually--we agreed that the best use of Bud and what he started calling the KVM--short for Kansas Vampire Militia--would be for them to stay behind and to seek out more like them and like us to help us stand against the likes of Marissa and Miranda. We are going to stay in close contact to see how things are going and to keep them up to date on what we need of them.

We couldn't come to a good agreement on how they should handle those of our type who don't agree with our point of view about feeding off of people. While some others think vampires of that type ought to be allowed to exist and live according to their own conscience, most of them think that anyone who attacks people need to be exterminated. This is war now. We have to protect the innocent from the monsters among us.

I feel revitalized. I have a purpose, and a focus, and now I even have a group of supporters. For sure, there are many people who will die before we take care of things, but we're on the right path.

We headed out at sunset, targeting Chicago. Why Chicago? No idea. Mr. Bittel suggested it and none of the rest of us had any idea where we should be going. At this point Marissa and Miranda could be anywhere in the country. Anywhere in the world, actually.

We stop near Kansas City to get something to eat and take a break. It's weird to be here again. It seems like we just left this place. And, weirdly, this place kind of feels like home.

"I don't really want burgers." Teresa tells the rest of us.
"There's a Taco Bell around the corner." I tell her. "We can walk over there, if you want?"
"Um," She looks over at the golden arches and sighs. "I guess."
"I'll come along too." Jess says, turning away from the door to the restaurant.

“Oh, I kind of figured you were going to stay with the others.” I say. “I just… I mean one of us needs to, just in case.”

Her face goes slack as she nods slowly, her eyes darting down to the ground. She looks toward Teresa and she presses her lips flat.

“Sure. You take the princess to get her precious little taco.”
“Jess,”

She is through the door of the restaurant before I can even complete the thought. I have no idea what is going on, but this is getting really old.

“Did you say something to upset her?” I ask Teresa.
“Me? What would I have says?” Her eyes dart angrily toward the door Jess had gone through. “Maybe she’s the one who is being a jerk, Brynne. Ever think of that, love?”

She pounds her feet against the ground as she retreats away from me, toward the Taco Bell.

At the restaurant she orders her tacos, I order mine, and we wait in a booth for them to finish up our food. We’ve already gathered our stack of sauce--fire for her, mild for me–and we filled our drinks from the too-foamy machine near the door. I even managed to snag a couple of mints to take with us when we left.

“What is taking you so long to read that book?” I ask. She has her face in it again.
“Hm?” she asks. She peeks over the top briefly before flipping the page.
“Why is it taking so long to read that book?”
“I’m concentrating on each word so I can understand it completely. It’s fascinating.”
“But it’s not even that long. How can it take you this much time to read, even if you are paying extra attention?”
“The characters are very deep.” she replies, never looking my way.

Okay, well, obviously she is not in a chatting mood. Will she ever be in a chatty mood again, though?

“When did you start reading so much?” I reach over and push her book down so she will look at me. “I thought you liked movies.”
“I like movies, but books are better.” She reaches up and rubs the side

of her head. “Can I read my book now? Or were you planning to read it to me?”
“Why are you avoiding me?!”
“I’m no–”
“Two twenty-seven.” the woman at the counter call out.

Teresa stands and approaches the counter. I honestly don’t know why it is so important to shout out our order number, we’re the only ones in here. Couldn’t she just say ‘hey, your food is done girls?’

When Teresa returns, she pulls a taco from the pile and begins lathering on fire sauce.

So *much* fire sauce.

“Better hurry up, we wouldn’t want to keep Jessica waiting.” she says.

She bites into her taco and glares across at me as she chews. Her eyes are full of resentment. Toward Jess? I’m assuming, but I still can’t figure out why.

Or maybe I can.

“Because, what, I can’t change you?” I ask.
“Won’t.” she says, sneering. She takes another bite. “You mean won’t.” she says, her mouth full of taco.
“That’s right, I mean won’t.” I stand up. “And you know why.”
“No, I do *not* know why.” Her voice is elevated, and she jumps to her feet as well. “You need protecting!”
“I’m doing fine.”
“No, you’re not, and you don’t even care.” She says, poking at my shoulder with her finger.
“Well what does it matter to you? I’m here to protect your family, not the other way around. And I won’t make the mistake of turning you into–”
“Like you did Jess?”

A man that had not been there before appears behind the counter. He looks as though he may be assessing whether to just toss us out himself, or if maybe he should call the cops. Little does he know that neither would really be all that effective.

“We’re going.” I say to both Teresa and the man.

We walk out of the Taco Bell, leaving the remains of our dinner behind, and head back toward the McDonald's around the corner. But there are guests awaiting us just down the road.

Barghest.

"I thought they didn't like the dark?" Teresa asks.
"Me too." I tell her.
"So where do we run?" she asks, barely above a whisper now. She is already easing backwards away from them.
"Running would not help." I say, grabbing at her wrist. "They are much faster than you."

Faster than me, actually.

So what's the plan, Campbell? If running isn't an option then what, fighting? There are six of them and one of me, and I have to protect Teresa.

The dogs stare at us and snarl. The lead one, the largest one, does that phase-out-of-existence thingy, then throws its head back and lets out a spleen-splitting scream.

"Well hell." Teresa says.
"Yeah."
"And this, love, is why you should have changed me."
"I tell you so is so beneath you." I mumble.
"No it's not," she says, smiling a fake smile. "Good doggy. Hi boy." she says to the lead dog.
"I don't believe that will do you much good, pretty girl." a voice calls out.

The voice is a jolt. Teresa jumps. I take the chance and flick my eyes in the direction it had come from and find a handsome looking young man staring down at us from a nearby tree.

"They don't play well with others." he says, his face contorting into a horrible scowl that fit his obsidian eyes perfectly.

There is a popping sound, then one of the back barghest fall. It is already struggling to its feet as the van bumper makes contact with it, sending it flying.

I grab Teresa and shove her toward the lead dog. She screams, and a

part of my brain screams along with her.

This is crazy!

But I know that the best chance I have is to distract and confuse the dogs, and Teresa is… well, bait. I can hate myself for it later.

It works. The lead dog twists her way, leaving me free to grab it around the middle and squeeze hard enough to break its ribs. I don't think I have ever squeezed anything that hard before in my life.

I could hear more gunshots as Jess, Barney and the others take care of the other barghest. Except one. One that claws at my back, slicing through skin, muscle, and maybe even bone with its fine-edged claws of steel.

"Tree!" I scream out, and I turn to fight off my attacker as best I can.

But it is more difficult than ever. My arms are not responding quite the way they should. Muscle damage in my back is limiting my ability to fight, and this is a fight that has to be won at all costs.

The barghest I am fighting steps back, then leaps at me, shoving me over backwards and sinking its teeth into my neck. I am able to shove my thumb into one of its fiery eyes, making it squeal in pain and retreat.

One flickering flame floats in front of me, a painful moan coming from its general direction. And then the flame materializes into a fuming dog, foaming at the mouth and taking aim at me.

It lunges again!

I raise my legs and shove against it, sending it flying over my head and into a nearby car.

Another barghest is on top of Teresa. It hasn't yet sank its teeth into her, but it is getting ready.

And I am not going to let that happen.

I struggle to my feet, stumbling and sliding back to the ground toward Teresa. It is going to get her. It is going to tear at her throat as the other one had mine, and I would be too late. Teresa is going to die.

“No!” I gurgle.

I have time to realize there is blood running from my mouth. The other barghest did a lot of damage to my throat. I will survive this, but because I refuse to give Teresa the ability to defend herself, she will not. She is the whole reason I am doing this in the first place.

The fur on the back leg of the creature is blotchy, sagging off in strips and bleeding. It looks like maggots chewing on the exposed sore, and I can’t help thinking I’d be cranky too if that were me.

I grab onto the strip of fur, which is barely within my reach, and I yank as hard as I can. The barghest lets out a yelp, then spins from Teresa and toward me.

Crisis averted.

Except it is faster than I expected. Before I can move, it clamps its jaws onto my forearm. There is a cracking sound, then pain. A lot of pain.

Then gunshots.

Then silence.

I am staring up at the tree where the lamia had been when I am finally able to breathe and process the fact that the attack is over. Teresa and Jessica both are leaning over me. Jess grips onto my arm and shakes me.

“Brynne!” she shouts. “Are you okay? Say you’re okay! Oh my God, can you breathe? Can you talk? What do we do?!”
“Don’t die.” Teresa mumbles. Her eyes are rolling back. “Don’t.”
“What do we do, honey?” Jess asks. “Tell me, I’ll do it. Oh no, oh God, oh please just tell me.”

Her eyes are narrowed on me, and she isn’t blinking. Celeste appears beside her and tries to nudge her aside, but she won’t let go, instead shrugging Celeste roughly away. Barney finally is able to get her attention and point out that she needs to stop yanking on my arm, it may hurt me.

“Stop.” I mumble. “I’ll live.”

“There’s so much blood.” Teresa says, swaying now.
“Someone…” My throat hurts, and my voice is gruff and crackly. “Grab her before she passes… out.” I say, nodding toward Teresa.

Jess leans over me and slides her arms around me. With great care she lifts me up, holding me in sort of a hug position as she carries me over toward the van. When she sits me down and slides back my shoulder is wet. Not with blood, with her tears.

“I’ll be okay.” I croak. Aww, it’s kinda sweet that she is so worried. “I heal quickly.”
“I know.” she says, pausing and closing her eyes as she nods. “I was just scared.”
“Me too.”
“No, you dimwit, I was scared it would kill you.”
“Yeah, me too.”

Celeste comes and looks over me, and between her and Sabrina they manage to wrap my neck tightly and fashion a sling for my arm. It takes a while for Jess to convince them I don’t need to visit a hospital.

“Will she be okay sitting up?” Mr. Bittel asks.
“I’m okay.” I mumble.
“We can put her in the back, so she can lean over and try to rest.” Celeste tells him.

I don’t argue, just let them guide me to the back of the van, where I can sit alone. I lean against the side of the van as we pull away from the scene of my near-death.

How did they find us?

What happened to that lamia?

Sunday, August 24

We don't make it to Chicago.

Right up I55 huh? Nice choice.

That is the text I got from Marissa. Just before the van comes screeching to a halt.

"This does not bode well." Mr. Bittel says.
"Run them over!" Andre tells Barney.

The door nearest me flings open and I stare up at the face of a lamia woman.

"Hello little one." she says, snarling.

She doesn't attack, just stands there and snarls. It takes me a moment to come to my senses enough to start to move and react.

"Be nice, Claudia." A loud voice with a very distinct southern accent booms out before I can do anything.

The woman in front of me takes a step back and smiles. Claudia? Be nice?

"We're not here to fight." The booming voice says.

It is coming from the side of the van, and I can't see who it is coming out of. I expect a large, hulking man, muscular and ferocious. But when the owner of that voice appears around the back of the van, it is a woman.

"You Brynne?" she asks.

Yes, a woman. A tiny woman. A woman so small that I am not sure she is even a fully grown adult.

Kind of like me.

Except, ya know, I'm more soprano-ish while she has the deepest voice I have ever heard coming from a girl.

"Yeah." I say, nodding.

Is everyone else as confused about this as I am? Is this a delay tactic? Or… I don't know, an attack, but they want to send a message first?

"Did Marissa send you?" I ask.
"Miranda, actually." she growls out. "But we're here to talk. And you'll want to hear what we have to say."
"Uh," I scoot out of the van and rise to my feet. "Go on then."
"And can everyone please lower the guns?" she asks, nodding toward the van.

When I turned I see the rest of my group all holding guns up, pointing at various vampires, as well as at least two lamia, who are encircling us.

Yeah, even Teresa is holding a gun, unbelievably.

"Lower the guns." I tell the others.

They give me uneasy glances, but they lower them. Jess starts to open the side door, no doubt to come to my side, but I wave her back down.

"Okay," I tell the woman. "Now what do you want?"
"I'm Bernice." the woman says. She extends a hand toward me. "And we need to make this quick."
"Nice to meet you?" I say, grabbing her hand.
"Yeah." She shakes hard, practically ripping my hand off.

A vampire, but an incredibly strong one. She must have had very good genes before being changed.

"And just so you know, Miranda only *thinks* we're going to be attacking you. She'll find out differently soon enough, but for now let's just keep that our little secret, 'kay?"

She winks at me and smiles. Can I trust this? Can I trust her? What if

this is all a ploy to get us off our game so that we're easier to take down?

"I just got a message from Marissa. They know where we are." I tell her.
"Yep. They've got a tracker somewhere on your van, girl-o. If it were me, I'd search that sucker from top to bottom."
"A tracker?" Barney shouted.
"Yep." Bernice replies, leaning around me to see him. "My guess: GPS."
"Well damn."

They've been tracking us all this time. Wonderful. Only they couldn't have been tracking the whole time, or they would have found us sooner. Unless they are playing with us. Torturing me and Jess.

They did find us in Georgia. Then there was the attack in Overland Park, which seemed to come out of nowhere. And now this.

"Barney, get on that." I tell him.
"Yeah, I think so too." he responds.
"Thank you, Bernice." I say.
"Yep." She nods, then winces. "What the hell got to your throat?"
"Oh this?" I say, reflexively raising my hand to touch the area. "Barghest."
"Bar what?"
"Hell beasts." Claudia tells her. "That's all you need to know, boss. Hell beasts."
"Okay then," Bernice says, "So how did it get you?"

I give her a short summary of what happened, starting with us walking from Taco Bell and ending with the part where I noticed the lamia missing from the tree.

"He scrammed the second we showed." Celeste tells me.
"Miranda must have someone running the dogs for her." Claudia says, laughing, oddly. "Disgusting, if you ask me."
"I would have to concur with that opinion." Mr. Bittel says.
"Back to the point," Bernice says, gaining all our attention. "You should probably expect others ahead. Some of them may not be as nice as we are."
"Thanks for the warning."
"Yep." she says. She punches my shoulder. "Thought a heads up would do you some good. Is there a way we can contact you if we

come up with more information to help you out?"

I can't see any reason to not give her my phone number. Marissa and Miranda already have it anyway. Bernice gives me her number as well, and tells me to give them a call when I need help.

So apparently we've gained a second militia. I just hope this group is in agreement with us on the fundamental beliefs, namely in not hurting regular people.

So are most of the vampires--and other non-human people out there–just as human-friendly as we are? So far the majority seem to be. Maybe my thoughts about wiping out all the monsters in the world are misplaced. Maybe we can… like, all get along?

Great, now I can't stop thinking of that old song from the sixties.

All we are saying is give peace a chance.

But it rings true. Maybe it's worth it to give it a chance. Maybe we can all share this world together and be okay. Maybe.

Maybe everyone except Marissa, Miranda, and their cohorts.

Because yeah, they definitely have to die.

***

It takes twenty minutes for Barney to find the tracker. Trackers. There are two. One in the frame of the car, one on the roof.

We had a long discussion about whether to break them, or if maybe we should leave them on for a while. Like maybe we could let one person drive the van around in circles and distract them while the rest of us go off in a different direction.

Sabrina was the one who, very politely, pointed out that it was a stupid idea. That one person driving the van was almost certainly going to be attacked.

In the end, Andre came up with the idea to put them on a random car somewhere. I felt bad, because it probably meant whoever was driving *that* car would be attacked. Mr. Bittel suggested we stick it on a freight train. It might distract them for a little while before they realized it

wasn't our car. Especially if he is right that most freight trains don't go any faster than cars do.

It takes a little waiting to find a crossing. Then we have to wait for a train to pass by. I kept worrying that we'd be attacked again, but we got lucky and found a train before that happened. So at least there is that.

And then we change directions. There is little point in heading to Chicago if they know we were coming. They may be thrown off by the train for a while, but not for long.

Maybe long enough for us to figure out what to do?

I could never be that lucky. *Humankind* could never be that lucky. They are the ones I worry about now, because Marissa and Miranda are not going to stop. Not now, not ever.

Not even when I'm gone.

That is what is starting to become more and more clear to me. They are beyond insane now. They've become enamored with killing. It has become a sport to them. An art.

A sickness.

Monday, August 25

We stopped last night in a small town south of St. Louis. To be honest, it's as good a place to be as any to stay until we are ready to move on.

"What are you doing up already?" I ask Teresa. She is sitting in a chair near the dining table of the house we sort of, um, borrowed last night.
"Reading." she mumbles, not looking up.
"Ooh, a different book." I sit next to her. "What happened to the other one?"
"It ended."
"Yeah,"

I'm sure it did. Days ago. What I don't understand is where she got this one. Maybe there was a bookshelf around here somewhere that I didn't see.

Never pictured her reading The Odyssey. Not for fun, anyway.

"We might be here a few days."
"Yep." She nods, but doesn't look away from her book.
"Want to do something later?"
"I'm reading."
"So take a break." I say.
"Eh." she says, shrugging.
"We can go shopping, maybe?"
"No thanks."
"A movie?" I suggest. "Come on."
"Nah."

Fine. Let her sit there and ignore me. I don't care if she's upset about something. She's being stupid if she is this angry because I won't doom her to a life of torture like mine.

I don't want her to be like this. And I want so badly to have her with me for eternity. At least I thought I did. She's kind of different now. I

miss the old Teresa. I want the fun-loving girl back.

“Hey,” Jessica says, nudging my arm as I walk past.
“Leave me alone, Jess.”
“What’s up?”
“Nothing.” I tell her, as I head to the back porch.

There is a swing back there, and I take a seat on it. It’s one of the bench type porch swings, so Jess invites herself to sit right next to me.

I want to be alone.

“It’s hard, ya know?” she asks. She looks out into the distance and sighs.
“What is?”
“Wondering if I’ll ever have someone willing to try so hard to make me happy.”
“What do you mean?”
“You just keep trying and keep pushing for that girl, and she does nothing but push you away.”
“Jess,”
“I don’t understand how you can care so much about her.”
“She’s just…”

I stop and shrug. Just what? My soul mate? I’m not sure I believe that. Mostly because I’m not sure I have a soul. She’s the one I love? Yes, but it doesn’t always feel so reciprocal. Or ever. Plus, there’s just something not right there. Like… like maybe she isn’t the one for me, I don’t know.

“I can’t help how I feel.” I finally say.
“I know.” I see her nod in my peripheral vision. “Me too.”
“And who do you feel that way about?” I ask her, turning and trying to smile. “Tony?” I joke.
“God no.” she snaps.
“So who?”
“Who says there was anyone?” she asks, but her face is turning red.
“Come on, who’s the lucky guy?” I prod.
“Nobody!” she snaps at me. “There is no lucky guy.”

She gets up and hurries back into the house, away from me and my prying questions.

You would think she could take a little poking at from me, considering

how much she has been giving lately. Not to mention how sarcastic and hostile she has been toward Teresa.

I'm pretty sure everyone in my life has gone insane. That's it, right? Either that or it's just me that's insane. Totally plausible.

I hear Barney shouting inside the house. I hurry in to see who he is shouting at and find him staring down at his phone, unleashing a profanity-laced rant.

"What is going on?" I ask.
"The frickin FBI put out an announcement searching for you, Jessica, and the entire Bittel family."
"Not good."
"Your predilection for understatement is still intact, I see." Teresa says. She runs her hand through her hair. "What now?"
"No clue."

Well, at least Teresa isn't staring down at her book anymore. That was getting kind of old.

So the FBI huh? I know they have mentioned me before, but never Jess or the Bittels. Wait, was it by name? What was he looking at?

Oh crap, it *was* by name! And with a picture of the Bittels and Jess. We're all in a lot of trouble now. No more blending in, no more getting away from anyone. People are going to recognize us.

Wait, how many of the FBI wanted people have I ever recognized? Well none, really, but I mean how many *would* I recognize on the street? Maybe one or two.

OK, well, we're probably going to be okay. Jess isn't exactly the most recognizable person in public, I guess. She has the same basic look as a lot of girls. I mean much, *much* prettier, but similar. I can tell the difference, of course.

The Bittels aren't the most unique people, either. So maybe we'll all be okay.

Oh, well, then again maybe we won't. The news reports say we were last seen in the St. Louis area.

Crap!

Tuesday, August 26

"So really, the only reasonable course of action is for us to be converted, Brynne." Mr. Bittel tells me.
"I can't do that. I've told you–"
"Honey, we just really need to consider–"
"No, Jess!" I stand and stare down at her, working hard to rein in the seething anger I hold inside. "And that's final."

I go out to the car and sit inside it, needing time alone and having nowhere else to go.

I will not put them through this. Teresa and her family will never have to go through the years and years of wondering what kind of monster they are. They will never have to worry that someone will realize they aren't aging. They won't have any of the self loathing when they have to drink human blood to stay alive.

"Hey there." Celeste says. She slides into the seat on the opposite side of the van from me. "How are you doing?"
"Not well."
"Yeah? So tell me about it."
"There is too much to even begin to tell you about."
"Maybe we could sneak out and get something to eat?" She reaches over and touches my arm. "We could even go through a drive through, if you're worried we'll be noticed."

She just doesn't stop. This is getting kind of old. I embarrassed myself by flirting with her when to her I looked like just a kid, and she turned me down. Now that I am back around Teresa and have said I want to be with her instead--sort of, anyway–she *now* wants to spend time with me? Not happening.

I start to tell her no, and to do so emphatically, when my phone rings. Since everyone else I know is right there and would just talk to me in person, I assume it is Marissa. But no.

“Hello,” I say into the phone. And I start to ask who it is when I am interrupted.
“Hey there.” a voice says. “How the hell’s things going for ya’ll, man?”
“Bud?” I ask, sitting up straight.
“Ayup. Say, I might be in a spot of trouble and needin’ your help there, man.”
“What kind of–”
“Got ourselves chased down b’them damn baddies, and they done kilt off half my crew, man. Me n Heids are hiding in a old bell tower just off I-70 close to some place called Arriba.”
“Where is–”
“Heids is not doing well, man. She ain’t like us, she human, and they damn near took her apart.”
“Bud, I don’t know if we can get–”
“Safe now, but holed up. Stuck here and no way out. There are three o them an only one a me, man. Get here quick, ‘kay?”

The phone goes dead.

Crap!

I jump to my feet and hurry inside, Celeste on my heels. She keeps screaming at me, wanting to know what is going on. I don’t take time to explain to her, she can learn with the rest of them.

“What’s going on?” Jess asks, instantly alert and on her feet in the living room. Her eyes dart to the door behind me and then back to me. “Is someone here?”
“Bud is in trouble.”
“Bud from Colorado?” Sabrina asks. “Oh dear lord, what kind of trouble?”
“We need to go.” I say. “Now!”
“Hold on, hold on,” Barney says, his hands out in front of him in a whoa gesture. “We can’t just pack up and go because… how do you even know he’s in trouble?”
“He called.” I explain.
“Why should we save his ass?” Andre asks.
“Shut up, ‘Dre.” Teresa tells her brother. “Of course we should go.”
“No, it’s…” I say. This is stupid. It’s a classic trap. “We can’t, it’s too dangerous.”
“Tell us what he said.” Jess says.

I tell them everything he had said, as well as I could remember. We can’t go, I can’t put everyone at risk, but it just… he’s going to die.

And he's an ally.

"So it's too dangerous, right?" I say.
"Why would he call you?" Andre asks. "He had to know it was useless. You're not going to race off to save him just because he called."
"I'm in." Teresa says. "If you go, I'm going."
"No damn way!" Jess snarls at her.
"Jess–"
"No Brynne. If we go, it's just you and me." Her eyes go over each person in our group. "We're the only ones here who stand a chance at surviving this if it goes bad."
"Hey!" Barney says, slapping a hand at the gun on his side.
"You're not going!" Jess and I both tell him at the same time.

So we go? Jess and I? I guess that makes sense. We'll have to leave everyone else here and unguarded. I don't feel very good about that. On the other hand, we seem well hidden for now. And the trackers are probably halfway to Seattle by now, or wherever they were headed.

"Barney, Celeste," I say. "You two are in charge of keeping everyone safe here." I stand and walk toward the door. "Come on Jess, we've got to get moving."

"Wait a minute," Barney protests.

"We're taking the car, Barn." Jess tells him. "We'll be back as soon as possible."
"Wait, I want to go." Teresa shouts out, coming after us as we head to the door.
"Stay." Jess tells her, angrily. "You'll just get yourself killed."
"Someone needs to watch Brynne's back." she counters.
"Then you'll get Brynne killed. Just shut the hell up and sit down, Teresa. We don't have time for this."

Wednesday, August 27

It takes circling the area for an hour and two more calls from Bud to zero in on where he is. And apparently his girlfriend Heidi, who he almost always calls Heids, is barely breathing at this point.

“What are they doing?” Jess asks.

There they are; three vampires just camping out on the ground below the old bell tower. It looks like the tower has been part of a church at some point, but the church has fallen down almost completely, leaving only the one wall and the bell tower.

“Why don’t they just climb up the outside, or get a ladder, and go up after them?” I ask.
“Not really liking this, Brynne.” she replies. “Let’s be careful.”
“I’d say duh, but that would be completely unnecessary at this point.”

We watch carefully for maybe twenty full minutes, trying to figure out what they were doing. Why haven’t they noticed us and been alert? I can’t figure it out.

We decide to at least try diplomacy. None of the three look all that tough, and we figure we can outrun them at the very least, so the direct approach seems easier than going in fighting right away.

It doesn’t work.

The second we show our faces, and before I can even open my mouth to speak, a male vampire with hair halfway down his back jumps at us, snarling and laughing at the same time.

His buddies join in soon after.

Jess takes care of the long haired guy easily. She’s turning into quite a gifted fighter, really. I keep the other two busy, running back and forth and trying to stay out of their reach. Before long, Bud is down

there with us, and he's able to take both of them down while they are distracted by me.

"Get out of here, man." Bud tells them.

The three vampires eye him warily. They are broken up, beaten and bloody, and don't argue with him. He stares them down while they backtrack away.

"Wanted to kill 'em, man." he says. He shakes his head. "Couldn't do it with ladies present."
"You've got to be kidding me." Jessica says.
"Where is Heidi?"
"In there, man." he says, jerking his head toward the tower. "Not gonna make it, though. Thought of changing her, but I couldn't do it, man."
"I'm sorry, Bud." Jess tells him.
"One a you could, couldn't you man?" he asks us.

His eyes are pleading. He stares at us, hopeful, but his teeth are clenched and his shoulders slumped.

"I can't do it." he repeats. "I want to, man, but I just don't have the ability. But you're a purer bloodline, aren't you, man? You could, I bet."

"I'm so sorry, Bud." I tell him. "We can't do it."

"Why not?" Jess asks.

"Jess…"

I don't know what to say to her. She knows why. She knows I cannot just go around changing people. Not only could it be dangerous--I could fail--but it just wouldn't be right. There shouldn't be more of us in this world.

"Please, man." Bud says. Tears sprawl from his eyes. "She's all I got. She's everything."

"Bud…"

I don't think I've ever seen such a large man look so pitiful, so distraught. Without a doubt, he would take her place if I only ask. If I made a bargain, like offer to try to save her in exchange for his life so that I could limit the number of us in this world.

Not that I'd ever do that.

Still, how can he be so in love with her? I mean I love Teresa, I love Barney, I even love Celeste in some way, but I don't know if I would change places with them. Not right now, anyway. I have a mission to complete. Then I'd gladly trade places with almost anyone. Until then, I can't give my life up so easily. I can't just trade my life for that of another.

Not just any other, anyway.

If it were the right other, the only other who could go on to complete this mission, to rid the world of the awful disease that these monsters curse the world with, then I could. In a heartbeat I could.

In a heartbeat I *would.*

But this man, this grown man who has volunteered to help in my fight, who has shown himself to be on the right side and to be a tender, peaceful individual, would gladly trade places with her.

I can't deny him.

"Please." he whispers, eyes still boring into me, audibly weeping now. "Please."

I nod.

It is the only thing I can do.

Bud guides us up the tower, to the place where he and Heidi has spent the past couple of days. There she is, cuts all over her and her hand laying at an awkward angle. On closer inspection I can see that the hand is nearly severed. There are deep grooves in her neck and shoulders--tear marks from some kind of sharp object, no doubt–and her face has teeth marks where at least one of them has bitten her.

She is so bad that I almost vomit.

Instead, I get busy. I prop her up, being careful not to hurt her any worse. Not that I need to worry. Either this will work, and any harm I do to her will quickly heal, or it will not work, and she'll be dead anyway. Her eyes loll open as I shake her slightly, and they roam around as if she is unable to focus on me.

“This may taste bad.” I mumble.

I do as I have before, ripping my wrist open and placing it against her mouth. I start counting backwards from thirty, hoping to give her enough without going too far and killing her.

At first, she doesn’t respond as my blood filled her mouth. Before long it is overflowing onto her chin and down the front of her shirt, adding fresh red marks to the dried and drying brown streaks of her own blood from before.

But then her eyes focus suddenly. At first that is it, but then her mouth tightens on my arm. Then her hands came up to grip at my elbow and wrist.

And then Jessica pulls me away from her.

“That’s enough.” she says.
“She’ll live, right man?”
“Yeah Bud, I think so.” Jess tells him.
“Brynne?” he asks.

I tilt my head his way to respond, but I am too weak. All I can manage is a very slight nod of my head forward. Then Jess is pulling me to my feet, supporting me, as we head down from the tower.

***

“You’re awake.” Jess says. “That was quicker than I expected.”
“What time…” I reach up and rub where the hammer smashed into my head. Or at least where it feels like I had been hit by one. “How long was I out?”
“Three hours.” she says. “How do you feel?”
“Like a railroad spike was shoved through my skull.”
“Good then?” she asks, laughing.
“Better than I thought I would.”
“Maybe you’re getting better at this.”

Is that even possible? How do you get better at something passive like this? Is it possible my body adapted to the loss of blood and energy from the process?

“Two for two.” I mumble.
“What’s that?” she asks. “Oh, right.”

“Alejandro said it didn’t work a lot of the time.”
“Maybe he lied.”
“Maybe.”
“What was Bud talking about with the purer blood thing?”
“No idea.”

Maybe not everyone can do this? Maybe with each generation away from the first vampires you get, the less your odds of successfully changing someone. It could be possible. And since I am a direct descendant of Alejandro, one of the first vampires ever, it means I’d be closer to the root of the tree.

So how many generations down is Bud? And how far down can you go before it stops working so well? How many generations before it stops working at all?

“We won’t be back to the others until tomorrow anyway, so do you want to stop somewhere to sleep?”
“No, we need to get back.” I tell her.
“That’s right,” she says, nodding. “We have to get back to Teresa.”

Her face reddens, and she lets out a groaning sigh as she shakes her head. She is gripping the steering wheel so tightly that I am worried she will break it.

“I don’t understand what you see in her.” she grumbles. She clenches her jaw and looks away from me.
“What is your problem with her, Jess?”
“She’s a brat!” she snaps. “Can’t you see that!?”
“Did she do something, or… say something to you?”
“She treats you like total shit.”

She slams on the brakes and swerves the van to the side of the highway. She actually breaks the knob on the shifter as she slams the car into park before turning to me.

“Can’t you see that, Brynne?”
“I–”
“Are you so blinded by your stupid lust for her that you just… she…”
“Jess,”
“You just…” She closes her eyes and swallows a deep breath. “You deserve better.” she says. She opens her eyes and I see them filling. “That’s all I’m saying.”

She turns to face forward and, after a moment of hesitation, she puts the car in gear. For a wonder, the shifter still works, and we pull back onto the highway.

Jess doesn't just blow up like that, and it kind of scares me. Will she continue to be like this? Will it get worse? Is this a side effect of being changed by someone who doesn't know what they are doing?

Maybe this is why so many of our kind seem angry or insane?

But this is Jessica Sloan. She's my best friend. And she is *not* going to end up like that. She's just mad about something. Something Teresa did or said, I guess.

Still...

Thursday, August 28

We are nearly back to the others, barely an hour away, when Jess' phone rings. She picks it up, looks at the screen, then taps the screen to answer.

"Hel–"
"Get here now!" Barney yells out from it.
"What's going–"
"We're under attack. Hurry."
"Barney, we'll be there as soon as… Barney? Can you hear me?"

She holds her phone out and looks at her screen for a long moment. Then she realizes she is still driving and better pay attention to the road, and she lowers it.

"Step on it." I tell her.

She nods, and the van lunges forward at a faster pace. If we don't get there in time then my entire reason for doing all of this will be wasted.

"Hurry, Jess." I whisper.
"Going as fast as I can without crashing." she tells me.

And then somewhere around the time we turn onto highway 67 we pick up a highway patrol pursuer. Jess looks over at me, but all I can do is shrug. If we don't stop then what can they do about it?

"What if they radio ahead and set up a roadblock?" she asks.
"I, um," I hadn't thought of that. "Guess we'll hope we're there first or that we lose them."
"Alright then." she says, leaning over the steering wheel. "Onward."

Five minutes later a second patrol car joins the chase, but still no roadblock. They try bumping against us to stop us once, but they fail. We turn off onto a smaller road before they realize it, so they pass the

turn and lose a lot of time on us.

In the distance I see a group of black cars and a large van. This was organized. This is bad.

“Looks like we’ll be finding a new hiding place.” Jess says.
“Yeah.” I agree, as we close on the group. “Maybe it’s a good time to visit somewhere out west.”
“I’ve always wanted to see Disney World.”
“That’s Florida. It’s Disneyland in California.”
“Ah.” She says, nodding. “So here we go.”

She slides to a stop behind the van.

The FBI van.

Crap!

Shots are ringing out as we leap from our van. I duck, but immediately realize they aren’t aimed at us. Not yet, anyway. Once those police cars get here--about thirty seconds by my guess--they likely *will* be aiming shots our way.

I kick two FBI agents in their backs, knocking them forward, before they knew what is happening. And I shove two more aside quickly as they turn my direction.

“There are too many!” Jess shouts out.

I look in her direction and see that she too has knocked several out of commission. But there are so many more. Many are running around from the other side of the house, coming our way now.

“We have to lead them away from the others.” I tell her.
“Br–”
“To give them time to get out.”

We run toward other agents, trying our best to keep near some of the agents we already are fighting so the odds of anyone shooting our direction will be minimal. A couple of agents step from the side, trying to take us down, but it doesn’t work out well for them.

As we approach the crowd of agents, one shouts out my name and points. Just after that, I turn to the side, into the trees. Jess turns

toward the house. Most of the agents follow me.

Great.

Keeping them busy is important, I know that much, but just how to do that is the hard part.

“You guys can’t catch a teenage girl?” I call back at them. “Pathetic!”

By taunting them I am hoping to keep their attention on me. It’s really all I can do to buy Jess time to get the others out. And I trust her with them.

Shots ring out toward me. Trees nearby splinter, and I jump behind a large one as I head further into the forest. They are still pursuing, which is just what I want, and I make sure they catch a glimpse of me now and then so they will stay interested.

After what seems like an hour of this, I race away from them far enough to slide my phone out and call Jess as I climb up a tree.

“Where are you!?” she shouts. “Are you okay, honey?”
“Yeah, I’m okay.” I glance down and notice a tiny wound on my leg from a bullet. I didn’t even feel it, but it’s just a scrape. “For now, anyway. Are you okay?”
“Yeah, but we have big problems.”
“No kidding?”
“Barghest.” she states flatly.

My heart drops. Barghest. Here. Are the VI and the devil’s duo now working with the FBI? Wonderful.

“Brynne?”
“I’m here, Jess. How many are there?”
“Two, as far as I can tell.”
“Just two?”
“But they wiped out a dozen officers.”
“Not good.”
“Really, I hadn’t realized.”
“Well just–”
“We’re going to be blamed for this.” she says.
“How many agents are left outside the–”
“Just one, and he’s hiding in one of their cars.”

One. Wow, I guess my distraction technique worked better than I thought it would.

“Get everyone to the car and go.” I tell her.
“What about you?”
“I’ll meet you there.” I say.

I hear a growl in the distance, followed by screams of someone being torn apart by whatever is attacking them. Barghest, I’m assuming, but the way things have gone lately I wouldn’t rule out werewolves, dragons, or even Azi Dahaka himself.

Life is interesting, anyway.

“Where?” she asks.
“We were just talking about heading to…”

That’s when the bullet hits my hand.

The one holding the phone.

I feel pain splattering through my hand and up my wrist. And the bullet continued through my hand, through the phone, and into my right shoulder.

I cry out in pain, then turn to see that the gunman is taking aim for another shot. Instead of just sitting there and letting him fire away at me, I drop from the tree.

Right onto a barghest.

I flail and I tumble from its back, then stumble as I make it to my feet. It snarls at me, then does that thing where it sort of disappears, except for its burning eyes.

I can’t fight this thing. Not without my hand and with an arm that barely moves. Not with the FBI agents coming my way, their weapons ready to go.

I turn and run. Not away from the agents, but toward them. I’m hoping I can avoid their shots well enough, and for long enough, for them to notice the barghest and start firing at it.

It works.

Yes, I take one more bullet in my left thigh as I race toward them, but most of them seem much more worried about the barghest, once they see it.

But by the time I circle around and make it to the house, Jess and the others are gone. The two barghest are still there, gnawing on their fresh kills.

So many fresh kills.

I can't linger there, just waiting for the FBI agents to come after me, if any survive the barghest in the forest. And I am sure not going to wait for the barghest to get me, either. The only thing I can think to do is run away.

Like always.

***

I spend that night in a large culvert that runs under a highway several miles away. It is dangerous if the barghest finds me, but I don't see a lot of choice. I need to rest and heal.

All night, I lay there thinking of all those poor FBI agents who were torn apart. I wish I didn't have to lead the barghest back to those agents. Those agents and those highway patrolmen didn't deserve to die like that.

So many deaths on my conscious.

So many deaths on my soul.

Tuesday, September 2

It takes several days for me to get to them. The first two days I stayed where I was and healed. It took longer than usual, for some reason. Probably because I was weakened from Heidi.

Once I was able to find a phone, three days ago I think, I tried to call Jessica's number, but I couldn't get through. I tried and tried. I had almost given up hope that any of them had survived.

Then yesterday I finally remembered Barney's number. Jessica's phone was dead, and she has been in bed recovering for the past few days. He said he and Celeste both tried to call several times, but I never answered my phone. Teresa even texted, but no response. They thought I was dead.

Or that I had abandoned them.

I could hear that in his voice, though he didn't say it. I knew that's what he was thinking, though.

He wouldn't tell me what Jess has been recovering from, though. He promised me she wasn't bad, promised that she wasn't hurt much in the fighting in Missouri, but he wouldn't explain. He just kept repeating that I'd see when I got there.

And I do.

In the motel room they are in now, all gathered around one bed, I see. All of them. All except Barney.

"What did you *do*, Jessica!" I shout.

Her eyes dart to me and she gasps. She begins to cry, and one hand goes to her mouth as the other reaches out toward me. I hurry to the side of her bed, and the others move out of my way.

“I can’t believe you did this!” I say.

I pound on her shoulder with the side of my closed fists, though it is only half-heartedly. It is too late to stop her from turning them all into monsters now.

Her arms wrap around me, and she squeezes as she pulls me in and cries. It takes a moment, but my anger dissolves. Mostly.

“Why did you–”

“I thought you were dead.” she says. She sniffles and loosens her grip on me.

“Didn’t Barney tell you–”

“He says you called, but I just… I mean I didn’t hear from you for a couple of days, and your phone, and I just feared that…”

She lets go, allowing me to raise up away from her. She looks like she is broken, yet… something. Some look. Some spark in her eyes.

She really thought I was dead.

“I couldn’t remember Barney’s number. Or anyone else’s. My phone got destroyed.”

I hold up my hand, which is still showing scars from where it had practically burst apart from the bullet. Her hands darted to it, turning it back and forth, so she can check it. She works my fingers to make sure they still move correctly.

“I’m okay.” I tell her.

“I wanted… we needed more help.” she says. Her eyes move to the others. “And they were in so much danger from everything.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry, Brynne.”

“It’s… okay.” I tell her.

It’s not, but it will have to be. I can’t undo what she has done. She’s not wrong about us needing more help, either. Or about them being in a lot of danger.

“And now you can be with her forever.” she says. She lets out a laugh that sounds more like a complaint than humor, and every muscle in her goes stiff. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Her eyes close and she turns her head away. Her lips clench together and she shakes her head. Then she faces toward Teresa and her eyes, burning almost as much as the barghests eyes were, zero in on her.

"You better be good to her." she tells Teresa.
"Jess," I say, reaching out to touch her shoulder.
"Or I'll kill you."
"Hey,"
"I swear to God, I will."

There is an awkward staring contest between the two for a moment, and Teresa looks both scared and brave as she stares back. Jess just looks resentful.

"Perhaps it would be the proper moment for us to partake of lunch." Mr. Bittel suggests. "Come, Teri."
"I'm not hungry." Teresa says, still staring down Jess.
"Come, dear." Sabrina tells her daughter, tugging on her shoulder.
"Be careful not to spend too long in the sun." Barney reminds them.
"Thank you, Barney," Sabrina tells him. "We will certainly be cautious."
"Mind if I come with?" Celeste asks.

They flow from the room, leaving me, Jessica, and Barney there by ourselves.

"They all seem to have recovered quickly." I say. "When did this happen?"
"Teresa was Sunday morning," Barney tells me. He sits heavily on Jessica's other side from me. "Celeste Sunday evening, the rest were yesterday."
"How?" I ask, my eyes moving from him to Jess as my breath catches.

Holy crap, that is insane! How could she do that much all at once? How did she not fall over dead, or worse.

What's worse, Campbell?

Not dying, I guess.

Like, ever.

"She just did it." Barney says. He shrugs. "Why?"

"Do you remember how long it took for me to recover after her?" I ask him.

"Guess I recover quicker." she says. "I'm just kind of tired now is all."

"You overdid it, Jessica!" I tell her, putting my hands on her upper arms and gently shaking her. "Promise me you won't ever, ever do that again."

"Uh," she says, blinking hard, "Okay?"

I throw myself on her and hug her. My heart is racing. I could have lost her! She could have done too much and ended up wilting away, so weak that there was no recovering. I don't even know if that is possible, but it seems like it.

"And they all survived." I say into her shoulder, which muffles the sound.

"Uh, yeah," Barney says. "Why wouldn't they?"

I sit up quickly and swivel to him. He really doesn't know? Jess didn't tell him it was possible that some of them would not make it through.

Wait, how is it possible that they all lived?

Was it just another in the long list of lies Alejandro tells me? Or is Jess better at this than he was? Am I better? I sure didn't see any sign that Jess or Heidi weren't going to survive. So maybe Alejandro had something wrong with him that caused some of his… uh, patients? Victims?

So maybe something in him caused his victims to die if they got too much of it. Though I'm really starting to believe that it was just another lie. It makes more sense. He lied about everything else, so why not that?

"Go to lunch, Barney." Jess tells him.

"I'm okay." he replies.

"Then take a walk."

"Eh, I've had enough time outside for now."

"Get lost, okay?" she says, turning her glare on him. "Please."

"Oh," he barks out a laugh. "Got it."

Barney makes his way from the room, pausing by the door to dig through his jacket for sunglasses. He smiles and offers us a little salute, and mutters a ‘good luck’ as he closes the door.

When I turn back to Jessica I see that her face and neck are flushed. I feel her forehead for a fever, which is kind of silly because… well, hello, we’re kind of vampires and all, so I’m not sure that whole warm to the touch thing with a fever really applies.

Not sure it doesn’t, actually. That’s one of those things which never really occurred to me.

“Do you think we would feel warm if we had a fever?” I ask her.

She nods as I speak, but doesn’t reply. Instead, her eyes are focused on mine, and she has a slight smile. She reaches up and feels my forehead like I did hers.

“What would make you think of something like that?” she asks softly.

“Uh,”

The reason should seem obvious. Maybe she means it’s a silly question and that I shouldn’t even worry about it, because a fever probably wouldn’t be too much of a problem for us.

“I’m sorry if I upset you.” she says.

“No point worrying about it.” I tell her.

“I guess.” She swallowed down a breath and glanced down, breaking eye contact. Her right hand went up to comb through her hair. “So I’ve been thinking,” she says, pausing to suck in a quick breath. “Maybe it… maybe *I* need to, um… to…” Her eyes dart at mine and quickly away. “I might need to leave.”

“Leave this hotel?”

“Leave you.”

She turns her face completely away from me. Her hands reach up and knead together in front of her face, then back down, before she begins twisting and fiddling with the edge of the comforter.

“What do you mean?” I ask her.

“It’s kind of hard… for me.” she whispers, her voice cracking.

“What is? Jessica, just… you don’t want to stop Marissa and

Miranda?"

"No, I do!" she says, turning to look at me again, if only briefly, before she looks away again. "That's not it."

"What is the problem, then?"

She shakes her head, and I can barely see a tear trickling its way down her cheek from my angle. She coughs, glances at me again, then coughs again as she stares at the wall opposite me.

"Teresa," she says.
"Tell me! Tell me why you don't get along with her. Why don't you like her?"
"It has…" she sniffles. "Taken me a *very* long time to sort this out, Brynne," she says. She sighs loudly. "Maybe I still haven't, I don't know."
"Figured *what* out?"

I reach out and put my hand on her shoulder. This is worse than the Satan Sisters. Scarier. Jess isn't like this.

"You like Teresa."
"You've known that forever."
"And you and her will… undoubtedly end up together."
"So?" I say, confused. "And don't be so certain of that."
"Well then you and Celeste," she continues. "Whoever it is, you have options. And… and I have nobody."
"What?" Oh. So… so she's upset because she hasn't found the right guy yet. "Well as soon as this is all over we can just live our lives, Jess. The right guy for you is out there somewhere, and we'll come across him one day. Just hang in there."

She nods, but she doesn't look back at me. Her body stiffens, and her face reddens even more--which I didn't think was possible.

"Maybe… maybe it's… not…" She closes her eyes. "It has taken me awhile to figure out that…"

And she just stops talking. She closes her eyes, curls her arms up into herself, and trembles.

"You're worrying me, Jess. What is this about?"
"I think maybe I… No, I *know* that the reason I never found the right guy, never even found an okay guy, is that no guy is the right guy for me. And… and that's because… I think I, I don't know, subconsciously

was trying to be something I'm not without realizing it, or being what I thought I was, or… whatever, all I know is that… I'm pretty sure I'm, ya know, gay, or whatever."
"Uh…"
"Certain." She states, straightening her body out, which is kind of ironic in some way. "I'm certain I am."

Oh.

Oh!

Oh?

So she's gay, and… available. And I'm also…

Snap out of it, Campbell! That is not what she's saying. Don't even go there. You tried to go there once and felt completely humiliated, remember?

Still…

No. Stop it! My gosh, you silly little wack job. Don't be that girl. Don't be the one who jumps at someone the first second they hint they are available. That's not what she's saying to you and you know it. She's just saying… just saying… Well, whatever she's saying, she's off limits. You have to be a good friend now. You have to be supportive, understanding, and you *cannot* take advantage of a vulnerable girl like that.

Especially one you care about so much.

And say something, don't just sit there like an idiot!

"Oh. Surely you don't think I'm going to have an issue with that?" I ask. "Jess, that's ridiculous."
"No, I… no. No." she says. Her mouth works, like she isn't sure how to continue. "It's just… I mean you and Teresa, or you and Celeste, and I… well, it's just *me.* Always."
"No, Jess, it's going to be fine."
"I won't ever have what Teresa, or Celeste. I mean I'm going to be alone, and I'll have to watch you with someone, and… and I just don't know if I can do that, okay?"
"There's the right girl out there for you. I know there is. We'll find her."

“No, I mean…”
“It’s okay. I get that it’s hard to see someone together when you’re so lonely. Believe me, I understand.”
“You don’t,” she says, shaking her head and smiling.
“I do. But it’s not so rosy on this side, either.”
“Meaning?” she asks. She finally turns a little toward me.
“I don’t know. Something is off with Teresa.”

Her face brightens at that, which is kind of insulting. But, I guess, having something else to concentrate on maybe helps. And helping me fix my messed up love life is apparently a good distraction for her. Especially since she can’t stand Teresa, which I still don’t get.

“Something is off?” she says.
“She’s just different.”
“She’s older.”
“I guess.” I agree. “But something is, I don’t know, just… not there, or something.”
“The spark is gone?” she asks, smiling.
“I’m *so* glad you can smile at my pain and confusion.”
“What?” she asks. Her smile fades, and she reaches out to me, placing a hand on my forearm. “No, honey, I’m not. I just…” She sighs. “Just, let’s figure things out, okay?”
“I guess.”
“Good.”
“No running off, though.” I tell her, trying hard to be stern. “That’s an order.”
“Yes ma’am.” she says, laughing.

There is a moment where she just sits there, staring up into my eyes and smiles. Then she turns away suddenly, slides toward the edge of the bed, and stands.

“So I guess we need to evaluate where we stand and what happens next?” she asks.
“Don’t you need rest?”
“I feel…” She turns my way and pauses, smiling again, before ducking her head away quickly. “Surprisingly well, all of a sudden.”
“Oh.” Well that was a quick recovery. “I don’t know what is next. What we’re doing doesn’t seem to be working too well, though.”
“Twenty seven more people in the past week.” Jess mumbles. “And your name at every murder scene except one.”
“It wasn’t at one?” I ask, surprised.
“Celeste thinks it’s probably a copycat.”

So now people are copying the murders. Yay.

Come to think of it, I'm guessing a sizable number of the murders are copycats. And they are still because of me.

"Let's go brainstorm with the others." She suggests.

She bounces to my side and grips my forearm before leading me out to find our group of vampires. Well, vampires *and* Barney, since he's the only one who wasn't changed.

Wednesday, September 3

The whole evening last night was spent arguing with how to take care of the problem that the sisters pose. The only thing we managed to agree on was that we actually have at least five problems.

There is Marissa and Miranda, who are the root of everything, but not the only dangerous thing by far. In fact, they may be the least dangerous in the long run, though their ability to influence and recruit makes them very dangerous.

There are the lamia. Their ability to fit in with the regular public makes them very dangerous. At least to us. I have no idea how vicious they are to the public in general, but to us they are problematic.

The barghest. Awful creatures. They might be the most dangerous one on one, but they don't seem to bother the general public much. Maybe because they are being controlled by someone. Who? That's a great question. I've seen them with both the VI and the lamia.

Which brings me to the VI. My constant companions. My constant tormentors. Only now they are completely corrupt, conspiring with Marissa and Miranda, and have resources that I can only begin to fathom.

The FBI and, by extension, every other law enforcement department. These are very concerning. If they come for us and we have to defend ourselves again, then someone could get hurt, and it's mostly going to be them. And they are the most innocent in this situation. They are being used and manipulated, by Marissa and Miranda. They are just doing the jobs they were paid to do, they don't know that they are going after the wrong people.

So how do we handle all these problems? That's the real question.

"Wanna go to the beach?" I ask Teresa.
"Sunlight." is her answer.

She's back to reading the book.

The *same* book.

Again.

"I can handle a little sunlight, as long as it isn't for long. And we need to see how well you handle it."

"I do okay." she says. She turns the page slowly. "Tried yesterday."

"Okay."

I sit next to her, and she shifts the book to the opposite side, turning her shoulders away from me. I don't understand this. She got what she wanted, she is now a vampire.

"How did you find blood?" I ask her.

"Jessica had some beforehand."

"Oh."

Well this isn't going well. I'm trying to start a conversation, but she doesn't seem all that into it. There has to be something I can do to get her to act more… Teresa-like.

"We could go to the mall."

"I don't really like shopping all that much."

"What? What happened to the shopaholic I knew?"

"Guess I grew out of it." she mumbles.

"Really?" I ask, sarcasm obvious.

"You should too."

Well ouch. I was never as interested in all the new clothes and accessories as she was. I like to watch people. I like to be around others in a place where I am not worried about the sun. A place I don't have to carry on conversations with others and answer questions about my background.

And I like the new clothes.

"You got your way, Teresa, so what's going on?"

"Not my way." she says, shaking her head. She turns and focuses on my face for two seconds before turning back to the book. "Just what Jessica thought was right. You need me to fight off the bad guys.

Doesn't mean you wanted me around."
"Right, 'cause I'm the one pushing the other away here."
"Not exactly being warm and welcoming, though, are you?" she asks.
"I have been very–"
"I'm trying to read here, Brynne."

I get up and head away from her, out the door and down the hall to the next room, which we also have rented. I can't deal with Teresa anymore right now. I don't know what is going on, but I miss *my* Teresa.

What happened to her?

Jessica looks up when I enter. Her eyes light up and a silly grin crosses her face. She opens her mouth to say something, but stops and just looks at me.

I wish Teresa were more like her. Jess never acts like she doesn't want me around. Jess never turns her back on me and buries her face into a book. Jess never is mean and brooding. Not toward me, anyway.

Jess is a better vampire, anyway. We did a little training with the new members yesterday, so I know. Jessica is stronger than Teresa, faster, and smarter. Of course it doesn't surprise me, since Jess has a much better, more athletic build.

And a prettier smile.

Uh… whoa there, Brynne. No no no, she's your friend. Stop having those thoughts there, girl.

Still, Jess says she's gay too, so maybe one day… I mean… like, if we spend a lot of years together and I get her slowly used to the idea, then…

Stop it!

This is not a storybook. Jess is your best friend. You practically consider her a sister.

No.

Never like a sister.

A best friend, one of the greatest people who have ever lived, and a wonderful and beautiful girl, but not like a sister. Never. I never thought of her like that. Not once.

"Want to watch a movie?" she finally asks. "I… uh,"

She hits the button on the remote and turns on the television. A couple appears on the screen, holding hands and cuddling. Jess fumbles the remote and drops it, her hand darting for it as the cuddle becomes more--becomes a kiss.

"Maybe cartoons!?" she asks, poking at buttons. Her face is burning red, and her voice is two octaves too high.

"Cartoons." I agree. "Yeah."

"Oh," she says.

She finds a cartoon and drops the remote down, then she turns and stretches across the bed to her pillow. She reaches under the pillow and pulls something out, tucking it tightly against her.

"Uh, I made sure you had… I forgot to give this to you last night." she says, shoving Jenna against me.

"Jenna!"

I grab at my doll and pull her against me. My favorite doll. My long time best friend. The only friend I had before Jessica. The one demoted to second best friend once I met Jess.

"I knew you'd want her."

"Thank you so much, Jess!"

"She refused to sleep without that damn thing until you got back." Barney mutters across the room.

I didn't even notice him there. From the sudden shock on her face, I don't think Jess remembered that he was there, either.

"Celeste got a call from that lady who stopped us near Chicago."

"Bernice?" I ask. "How?"

"She called your phone." he says.

"But my phone–"

"Was lost in Missouri." he says, nodding. "Yeah. We got another. Managed to transfer the number."

"But how?"

"Not that hard, believe it or not."

Well that's good news. I guess that means I don't have to memorize a new number. Not that I ever really remembered my own number anyways. I always had to look it up on the phone when I needed to tell someone.

"And?" Jess asks him.
"Wants to talk strategy."

Saturday, September 6

The SUV that Celeste 'appropriated' during the time I was hiding out in Missouri is roomy, but I'm happy to be out of it and able to walk around. Even if it is back in Missouri where I have to do the walking. Not that I have anything against the state as a whole, it just seems… dangerous right now.

Claudia, Bernice, and the rest of their crew are supposed to be meeting us at this rest area, though they aren't here yet.

"I'm going to the bathroom." Teresa says, as she turns her back and begins to trudge away.
"The others will be here in just a minute." Jess says. She narrows her eyes and takes a couple of loud breaths. "Can't you just hold your piss?"
"Bitch." Teresa mumbles in reply.
"Bi–"
"Now now, girls," Sabrina says, sounding nervous. "No need for that. And Teri, I've told you how I feel about that language."
"Yeah yeah."

Jessica crosses her arms and lets out a huff, her jaw clenched so tightly I worried she'd bust her teeth.

And then we are surrounded.

Barney and Celeste has their guns up immediately, as lamia, vampires, and an odd group of humans take position around us. The humans have guns up, but the others all are in relaxed positions, save for one lamia girl.

"Little one," she says, nodding.
"Claudia," I say. I nod back, but my eyes are already darting around to find their leader. "Where is Bernice?"
"Mmm," she purrs, smiling wide. "Fashionably late, as always, perhaps?"

She leans her head back and laughs. It is not a pleasant sound.

Is this a trap? Have we been lured here under false pretenses, only to be ambushed by our supposed allies?

Crap!

I dart my head around, trying to see where Bernice is. Jessica picks up on my unease, or has her own similar thoughts, and is also searching quickly.

There are a *lot* of vampires here around us. Yes, there are several of us now, but Teresa and her family have no experience in any kind of fighting, and I suspect a few of them would actively avoid a fight if they could. That is usually good, I don't want them getting hurt, but in this case it could leave the rest of us in a very weak position of not only having to fight for ourselves, but also have to fight for them.

Double crap!

And Claudia is cackling again.

"Everybody just take a breath and relax." I hear Bernice drawl out slowly. "Lower your guns there, partners." she tells Barney and Celeste.

I turn my head in the direction of her voice, but I don't see her, and I have maybe the best eyesight of anyone here. Better than Jess, anyway. And at least better than Andre and his parents, if road signs on our ride here are any indication. Teresa never looks up enough to know how far she can see.

"Up here," Bernice says. I glance up to find her on a large branch about thirty feet above the ground. "Just having a look-see to make sure you weren't followed."
"Makes sense." Barney mumble.
"Be right down."

She hops down from that branch to one a few feet down, then grips the trunk and shimmies down a few more feet before dropping the ground with a thud. She wipes down her jeans with her hands as she makes her way toward us.

“Are those still necessary?” she asks, nodding toward Barney and Celeste.
“Sorry.” Barney says, lowering his.

Celeste does not lower hers right away. Instead, she gives Bernice a very hard look. Her mouth is set in a thin line, and even from where I am I can hear her quickening breathing.

“What are we here for?” Celeste asks.
“Meeting of the brain trust, I suppose.” Bernice replies. “Lower that thing, will you?”

Celeste looks around, obviously uneasy with this whole situation, but eventually comes to the conclusion that she can lower her weapon, apparently.

“Now then,” Bernice says. She kind of waddles my direction, but her eyes move over Teresa, Celeste, and Teresa’s family. “I see we have some new members of our little family.” She looks at me and nods. “Your doing, no doubt?”
“Actually, no.”
“No?”
“That would be me.” Jess says.
“Really?” she asks. She looks at the group. “I’m sorry about the ones who didn’t make it.”

Jess and I look at each other. She looks concerned about that statement. Like maybe admitting that nobody died during the process would be giving away too many details.

“None.” I finally say, swiveling my head back to Bernice. “Nobody died.”

There are murmurs of confusion from the vampires around us. Bernice’s mouth goes slack, her eyes blinking rapidly at us. Finally, she waves a hand through the air as if dismissing the idea, and she laughs.

“For a moment there I thought you were serious.”
“I am.” I say. I didn’t expect her disbelief, really. Maybe I should have.
“She only changed them,” I nod toward our group. “And none of them were killed in the process.”
“How is that even possible?” one of the vampires, a man with spiky green hair, asks. “Ridiculous.”

“I don’t know.” I admit. “Someone told us he thought it was because we had an older bloodline, maybe.”

Bernice watches us for a moment. A broad smile crosses her face and her eyes go wide.

“That solves everything!” she says, rasping and stopping to cough. “You just create an army and we can easily deal with–”
“No.” I say, shaking my head. “We’re not creating any more. Not now, not ever.”
“But… but…” She trails off.

Claudia smiles then, and laughs. I don’t know what her deal is, but I wish she’d just… I don’t know, go away. Others in the crowd seem even more confused by me saying we won’t create an army than they were about me saying nobody died.

“Everyone here knows it, Bernice.” I say. “We should not exist in this world.”

There are grumblings in the crowd, and some of the group surrounding us glare and snarl in anger.

“So you’re plan is to just take my Terrence from me?” a human woman asks me. “Is that the plan? We help you stop those hideous women and then you kill us all off?”
“Not you--” Barney tries to explain, but a man--Terrence?--cuts him off.
“Not you, pumpkin.” he tells her. “Just us.”
“Over my dead body!” the woman shrieks. “Where the hell do you get off thinking you can just–”
“Not anybody!” Jessica shouts. “Nobody here is going to be killed.”
“At least not by us.” I add.
“We don’t want to kill anyone who isn’t a murdering monster.” Celeste tells her. “Just them.”

That seems to calm everyone. Or at least they all relax their stance.

“Why don’t a few of us go sit down somewhere for a little chit chat?” Bernice says.

She guides us to a bus that is parked on the edge of the lot. Once there, Celeste, Jessica, Barney and I go in with Bernice, who brings Claudia and two others–a male lamia she introduces as Ash, and a

human named Gloria--with her, before closing the door as a statement to the others that they should keep out.

“Something to drink?” Bernice asks.

The bus is redone inside, turned into a big camper. There is a bed above the back table, up by the ceiling, and if I were to guess I’d say that table itself would convert to a bed. There is a tiny refrigerator, a two burner stove, and even a microwave with a hood that is hanging above the stove. Lots of cabinets and a huge television, as well.

“We have vodka, if anyone is interested.” Claudia says, holding up a bottle. “I know I’m going to indulge.” She lets out another of her strange laughs.
“None for me, thanks.” Barney responds.
“I’ll take some.” the other lamia, Ash, says.
“It doesn’t have the same affect on them as it does us humans.” Gloria explains.
“We also have some wine,” Bernice offers, opening the refrigerator. “Cold beer, green tea,” She curls her nose up and glances at the human girl. “And… three cans of Dr. Pepper.”
“Hey, those are mine.” Ash says.
“Ash will share.” Bernice tells us, winking as Ash scowls.
“No thanks.” I tell her, and the others shake their heads as well.

There is a moment while we all find our seats--some at the back table, a couple in seats along the side, and two more on countertops, where they have to bend forward to keep from banging their heads on the upper cabinets. Drinks are dispensed to those who want them, and we even wait as the human from Bernice’s group uses the tiny bathroom.

“Let’s get down to brass tacks then, shall we?” Bernice rumbles, slapping her hand down on the table. “What’s our status?”

Sunday, September 7

We stayed up late into the night, hammering out plans to take down our enemies quietly, one at a time, hoping to build up our strength before going after the sisters and their closest cohorts. Bernice was surprisingly quite aggressive with her ideas, but we managed to rein her in to limit our risks somewhat.

I don't want anyone else killed. At least nobody on our side. Of course that slow and steady pace we agreed to also puts more innocent humans at risk. Three deaths yesterday, all grisly, all with my name at the scene. One was in Hawaii, one was in Quebec, and one was in Jefferson City--just a couple of hours away.

I don't know how long I can deal with people being killed in my name. It's… weighing me down? Yes, I think that is the right way to say that.

"I think I need to talk to you." Teresa says. "Before we leave."

We are heading out to scout a group of lamia in Wyoming. Bernice has information that there is a camp there where they are organizing attacks both against us and against humans in my name. My small group, minus Barney and Celeste who will remain behind to coordinate with Bernice's group, will be assessing the best way to attack and bring down the camp.

It's a start.

"What about?" I ask Teresa.
"Um," She looks toward Jessica for a moment, then leans close to me. "I think I'm ready to throw away the book, love." she whispers. "But I need to talk about it first."
"Uh–"
"Alone."

She turns and moves across to the trash receptacle, which is only three

steps away in the tiny cramped bus, then dramatically slams the book into the open can. She smiles the old Teresa smile, and for a moment my heart flutters.

Then reality sinks in. Throwing away the book means she will no longer ignore me. She wants to get back together. She wants her and I to be *we* again. The very thing I've wanted for so very, very long is right within my grasp.

But do I really want it now?

Teresa is different. I'm not sure all the ways how. Yeah, there are the surface things; she no longer likes to shop very much, she doesn't watch movies often, she enjoys reading and schoolwork more, she's more serious. But those aren't everything. There's some underlying differences that I just can't quite figure out.

But she's still Teresa.

She's still the girl I fell in love with.

Or thought I did.

Are first loves real loves? I don't know. Having never felt that way before, I can't be sure. And maybe it still is real, maybe this is just the first glow fading off of it a bit. Maybe her and I would still be happy together. But I'm scared that we wouldn't be.

We all climb down from the bus and step toward a nearby tree that is casting plenty of shade to protect us.

That's when Bernice notices something is wrong. I notice her noticing, and spin my head around. I hear Teresa gasp at my side.

"Freeze!" A voice roars.
"Don't move!" several others chorus.

Around us, on all sides, are men and women in dark uniforms. FBI uniforms, body armor and all. There are at least a hundred, and they all have military-grade, mean-looking, death-delivering weapons pointed our way.

"Don't move!" The original voice shouts. A very large, very armed man. "Hands in the air!"

“Well now,” Bernice drawls. “Which is it, Mister?” she asks. She laughs nervously. “Can’t have it both ways now, can we?”

I swivel my head toward her and see that she is slowly raising her hands. Claudia, next to her, is smiling as if this were the most hilarious thing she has ever seen, and she is holding in the guffaws.

“No talking.” the man says. A captain? Lieutenant, maybe? “Eyes front.”
“What brings you boys and girls?” Bernice asks.
“Yeah,” Claudia says, laughing out loud now. “If we knew you were coming we could have prepared a cake.”
“It’s baked a cake, Claud.” Bernice says. “If I knew you were coming I’d’ve *baked* a cake.”
“Always loved that song.”
“Really?” Bernice asks. Her face pinches in annoyance. “I could never tell. Is that why you’re humming it *all* the time?”

The man--leader, lieutenant, whatever--keeps shifting around, one foot to the other, then back again. His eyes keep darting from me, to Jess, to Teresa, on to Bernice. His finger is on the trigger of his gun, which is aimed directly at Bernice’s head, and I am a bit worried at the way it seems to twitch just a tiny bit every few seconds.

“Sir,” I say. I take one half step forward.
“Stop!” a woman calls out.
“Don’t move!” a man shouts.

My hands are in the air, and I’m doing my best to appear non-threatening, but I just wonder what would happen if we all took off running. Would we make it out before they were able to get us? We’re all pretty quick. Well, most of us.

Still, the humans among us would not fare so well, I suspect. Plus, there is a really good chance that at least one of these agents would get a few lucky shots in on us. We’re quick, but we can’t outrun bullets. The best we could do is make it hard to get a clean shot on us, but someone would manage it. It isn’t worth the risk.

“Please sir,” I say. “Tell us what this is about.”
“Do you have any weapons?” he asks.
“Sure.” Claudia says, bursting into howling laughter.
“Shut *up*, Claudia!” Bernice says, anger in her voice.
“No weapons.” I say.

“There are a couple of handguns in the bus.” Barney adds. “None on us.”
“All of you, get to your knees and place your hands behind your head.” the lead agent says.
“What is going on?” I ask again, as I sink to my knees.

I hear my friends falling to their knees behind me. Claudia’s constant laughing is getting on my nerves, though, and I want to spin around and muffle her somehow.

“What’s going on?” I ask a third time.
“We are here to apprehend you for trial on charges of terrorism in the murder of not less than three hundred American citizens. Now, don’t move!”

Terrorists.

We’ve been declared terrorists.

“That’s not legal.” Barney says. “The federal government can’t just declare someone a terrorist and then ignore their rights to–”
“Shut the hell up!” the agent tells him.
“Sir,” I say.
“All of you, face down on the ground.”
“Wha–”
“FACE DOWN!” he shouts, waving his gun in a downward motion in front of me.

I do as he orders, and I can hear the others doing the same behind me. Two different agents in the crowd whisper to their buddies that something must be wrong with ‘that one’, by which I’m assuming they are referring to Claudia and her incessant laughing.

She’s insane.

Boots pound the ground around me. Approaching. Rounded toes--black, with a high gloss--slowly move into my eye line. There is a piece of stick poking out of the side of one of the treads on the bottom, a piece probably picked up from the ground nearby. Gum. He just now stepped in some discarded gum, spit out by some uncaring, unthinking, littering person, who didn’t think it would matter or didn’t care if someone else’s shoes were sullied by their nastiness.

I hear zip ties pulling tight, no doubt around my friends’ wrists. And

then there are ties around mine. I think it's obvious at this point that these agents have no idea who they are dealing with. These zip ties are meaningless to most of us.

And then a growl comes.

No.

Please no.

"Sir," I say. "Sir, you have to listen to me."
"Shut your mouth."

Five more growls.

Five? This isn't good. This will be a bloodbath. And if Teresa would stop whining about being in the sun I could hear better to tell which direction they are coming from.

"Sir, if you don't let us go–"
"Shut. Up!" He barks. He grabs my hands and hauls me to my feet. "Your type don't have the right to pollute our air with the sewage coming from your mouths."
"Sir, if you don't release us–"
"Release you! Ha!"
"You're all going to die."
"Is that a threat?" he asks, getting into my face. "That sounded like a threat."
"Did she attack you, sir?" a woman asks. "Can I shoot–"
"No!" he snaps.
"Was that…" Claudia asks.

Suddenly she isn't laughing anymore. Nobody is laughing. Many of the FBI agents are starting to murmur, as they too can hear them now. I hear boots shuffling as they spin to look to our east, to the direction the sounds are coming from.

"What. The hell. Was that?" the woman who wanted to shoot me says.
"Release us and I can save you." I whisper.
"Not happening." the lead agent tells me, shoving me back down to the ground.

I can hear the barghest getting closer. Who knows what is coming with them, but there are *at least* five barghest.

Five is a lot.

“When they get here, we can’t just sit idly by.” Jess says softly, knowing that me, Bernice and Teresa could hear it. Who knows if the lamia can?
“I agree.” I respond, just as softly.
“Yeah.” Bernice replies.
“Where are my parents?” Teresa asks, loudly.

I hadn’t thought of that until just now. Where did they go? Why weren’t they out here when we exited the bus? Them and the others from Bernice’s group.

Not good.

They wouldn’t just abandon us. And there is no way they just hid because they heard the agents coming, because they would have warned us. At the very least, they would have come to our aid once they realized we were in danger and they had a chance to regroup.

“Shit.” Bernice says.

Five things happen at once then.

The first barghest comes into view of the agents, and they let a burst of gunfire rip. Which will work on the barghest, as long as they actually are able to hit them. Though it may take more shots than they expect.

Someone shoots at Teresa, who squeals in response. I don’t think it hit her, but it sounded very close. Close enough that she starts moving, anyway.

Bernice, Jess and I break our zip ties and leap to our feet. I don’t know about the other two, but the agents nearest me swing guns in my direction. I am able to shove the guns away from me, but it is close.

The human who is with Bernice, Gloria, chokes out a gurgling cry as an errant bullet, meant for one of us maybe, blows through the side of her head. Her blood and… brains... are splattered all over the agents nearest her, and one of them immediately bends over, gagging.

Seven--Seven!--barghest jump into sight, taking out a dozen soldiers

before anyone can respond. There are legs torn off, heads torn off, and guts spilled in less than an instant.

“Fire!” the lead agent shouts out.

And they do. The agents lay down a layer of gunfire so thick that there is no chance for us to get between them and the barghest to protect them. And in the process they doom themselves. Or at least a large portion of themselves.

“We gotta go.” Bernice says.
“Go go go.” Claudia says, laughing.

Jess and I look at each other and nod in agreement. Staying would do no good at this point. The agents are shooting everything that moves. Right now it is everything on the other side of them from us, but soon enough they’ll turn on us. And while it would be nice to be able to stay and save some of them, I really don’t think we’d be able to do a lot, and we’d be putting not only ourselves, but a lot of others at risk if we did.

Jessica grabs Barney and flings him over her shoulder, then takes off running. Bernice and all of hers follow suit. And while I am going to go too, I glance back and notice that Teresa is frozen, staring down at the dead girl, with panic on her face.

If she stays she might die. If I stay I might die. But I can’t leave her there. So instead of fleeing, I sprint to her side and grab onto her hand.

“We gotta run, Teresa.”
“So much blood.” she mumbles. She is shivering.
“Teresa,”
“Brynne, there is so much blood. So much death.”
“Teresa!” I call. I grab her by the shoulders then. “We have to go!”

An agent looks over his shoulder at us and begins to turn. I grab Teresa’s hand and yank her along as I ran away. A second later she is sprinting along with me. Luckily, no bullets pepper our backs. Very lucky.

***

The helicopters are still circling overhead two hours later. We duck

behind bushes and trees when they get to a position they could see us, but we keep moving as well as we can.

Still no word from the rest of our crew. Teresa keeps asking about her parents but doesn't talk much otherwise. Every ten seconds she twists her hand through her hair and winds it so tightly that I don't know how she hasn't pulled it all out yet.

"This had to be an inside job." Barney says.
"How you figure?" Bernice asks him.
"How would they have known where we were, for starters? How did they have time to assemble that many men together?"
"How did they even know to send that many in the first place?" Ash asks.
"Had to be an insider." Barney restates.

And he is right. There is virtually no other way. They can't be tracking us now, anyway. And how in the world did they get the US government to send FBI agents after us?

On the other hand, if someone is killing hundreds of citizens all across the country, it seems possible that we really have been declared terrorists. Who knows?

"We have to get out of here." Jessica says.
"Really?" Claudia asks, laughing of course. "Who would have ever thought of that?"
"My parents." Teresa mutters again.
"We'll find your damn parents when we can, now just shut up about it!" Jess shouts at her.
"Hey, Jess, don't." I tell her.

Jessica's shoulders droop and she looks away, her head hanging. She tucks her arms close to her body, nearly hugging herself. I don't think now is the time for her to go off on Teresa, but I understand that she's upset and not thinking correctly.

It doesn't explain all the other times, though.

"We're going to find everyone, your parents included, but we need to get to safety so we can plan this out better, Teresa." I tell her. "Please, just try to be patient."
"Patient?" she says. "Puh."

I understand that it has to be hard to wait to find them. I want to find them as much as she does. Or maybe not, but I want to find them pretty badly. I just want this all to be over.

Why can't this all be over now?

"First thing we have to do is find transportation." Bernice says, just as another helicopter flies over.
"No," Barney tells her, as he ducks behind a tree. "The first thing we have to do is get far enough away that we can walk freely without being shot."
"Might not be so easy." Bernice says, nodding. "They're going to have this area surrounded pretty well. They will have roadblocks set up."
"And the longer we take, the better they have us walled in." I say. "We need to hurry."

Tuesday, September 9

It took two days, seven 'borrowed' vehicles--several obtained under the cover of darkness--and two run-ins with barghest to get here, but I woke up this morning in a house in Wyoming.

And I smell bacon.

There has been no sign of Teresa's parents, and we have no idea why they would leave willingly, or why we wouldn't have heard them if they were abducted. It's a strange, and curious thing, and it is driving me up the wall.

I'm worried. I'm not panicking yet, there may still be a logical explanation that we just don't know, but I am *very* worried. There has to be a good reason we saw no sign of a scuffle, at the very least, even if we hadn't heard anything. And if they left of their own accord, why haven't they contacted us?

Teresa is almost completely hysterical at this point. All day long she just sits, staring into space and fidgeting, while she mumbles to herself. That, or she paces back and forth when we aren't in the car, and she keeps slapping at her own leg for some reason that I can't quite figure out. She won't let any of us talk to her, or at least she won't respond if we do. Sure, she'll get in the car if we tell her to, or eat if we tell her the food is done, but that's about it.

"So where is this camp we're supposed to be scouting?" I ask Claudia. She is sitting at the table, giggling to herself, while Bernice makes breakfast.
"Nearby." she says, laughing. "Nearby."
"How do you know this?" Ash asks her. "I never heard of this place, so why have you?"
"I have friends." Claudia says, pausing her laughing to stare down Ash for a moment before breaking into a new round of laughter.

The woman is creepy. Beyond creepy. I don't know how her and

Bernice wound up as friends, but I don't like her. And I *do* like Bernice, strangely. She's very easy going and humble. She seems like a nice, caring type, and worries as much as I do.

"So we find this camp," Barney says. He slides into a seat across from me and reaches out to grab an apple from a basket on the table. "We go in and wipe it out–"
"Should be easy." Claudia says, laughing yet again. Sickening.
"And then what?"
"Barney, you should know better than to ask hard questions so early." Jess says, taking a seat by my side. "Need coffee."
"Me too." Ash says.

We hold off the strategizing until we all have a chance to eat breakfast. Teresa doesn't come when we call her over. When I am done eating, I carry a plate with some toast and cup full of coffee over to her and sit beside her.

"Have something to eat, Teresa." I say.

She doesn't respond. She is a million miles away, and I'm not entirely sure she even knows I'm here.

I reach out and touch her arm, and she blinks for what is probably the first time in minutes. But she doesn't look my way. I reach over and rub at her back.

"It's going to be okay." I say softly. "Hang in there, we'll get them back."
"What if we never get them back?" she whispers. A tear streaks its way down her face. "What then?"
"We *will* find them."
"I don't know what to do, Brynne." she says.

And then she collapses against me, sobbing. Her arms go around my neck, and she hooks her chin over my shoulder. I put my arms around her back and hold her as she cries. The others are watching us, and I feel so bad about the pitying look that they are all giving her. But I pity her too.

Everyone is giving her a pitying look except Jessica. She looks… I don't know. Her arms curl over her chest and her eyes cast downward. Then she sees me looking at her and blinks hard several times before she looks at the clock on the wall opposite her.

And then she gets up and bolts from the room.

After several minutes of holding Teresa and letting her cry, her tears recede somewhat. She sits back a bit, but keeps a firm grip on my arm.

“We need to talk about this camp now.” I say.

She stares into my eyes for a moment, then nods. Her hands don’t release their grip on my arm, though. Not for a long moment. Then she leans forward and hugs me again, then sits back.

“I’ll just stay over here, love.” she tells me. “You go ahead.”

I move back to the table and sit with the others as we discuss the location of the camp. It’s less than a mile away.

Claudia seriously let us camp less than a mile away from it.

Ya know, from the camp that is filled with dozens of lamia who want us dead.

“We need to do a scouting run first, just to be sure where the security is.” Claudia explains. “It used to be at regular intervals along the roads surrounding it, but they may have changed it since I was last here.”
“You were here before?” Bernice asks. “You never tells me that part.”
“Seemed,” she pauses to laugh, of course, “...inconsequential.”
“Pretty damn *consequential* if you ask me.” Barney says, scowling at her.
“How many are there?” I ask.
“Now? Who knows?” Claudia answers. “Only fifteen or twenty when I was here.”
“And *why* were you here?” Ash asks.
“Why not?” she replies to him.

While we make our plans, I worry about Jess. Why hasn’t she come back? She has to know we are going to start--can probably even hear us now, depending on where she is.

Of course I have no idea why she left in the first place. Maybe she is just that annoyed with Teresa.

After our meeting is done, and while everyone else is getting ready to head out, I step outside to see if I can find Jessica. She is standing

beside a tree, maybe a hundred feet from the house, staring up into the sky.

As I approach I hear her sniffle. She glances back my way and coughs into her hand, then shakes her head before she looks away again.

“Damn.” she mumbles.

I step up beside her and glance her way, but she lowers her face and looked away as she wipes at her tears. Then she laughs and sniffles again.

“Well, this sucks.”
“What’s going on?” I ask.
“Huh,” she says, blowing out another very sad sounding laugh. “You know what, Brynne.”
“I have no idea.” I grab onto her arm and try to turn her toward me. “Are you worried about the others?” She shakes her head no. “So do you miss your parents? Is that what this is about?”
“I miss them,” she says, shaking her head. “But that’s not it.”
“Then what?”

She looks up at me, and her mouth starts to move several times, but she can’t find the words. She looks back down at her feet, as she runs her right toes in a circle in the dirt.

“You’re getting back with Teresa.” she mumbles.
“What?” I ask, then realize what she said. “Can we not change the subject, Jess? Please, just tell me what the problem is.”
“That *is* the problem.” She looks up into my eyes and her face turns crimson.
“I don’t understand.”
“I told you how I feel.” She tells me. She shrugs. “What’s not to understand?”

She told me how she feels about *what*?

“What, um, are you–”
“You know what I’m saying. And…” She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, blowing it out before looking at me again. “I can’t see you with her.” she says, voice breaking at the end. “So I… will just go away.”
“I know you can’t stand her, Jessica, but I don’t understa–”
“Oh my God!” she says, turning her back on me. “You can be so dense,

so… *naive* at times, honey."
"What are you talking about?!" I ask.

The girl is nuts. Or at least is acting like it. What in the heck is she getting at? I know I don't have a lot of life experience, but calling me naive, or especially *dense* is just… insulting.

Which, duh.

"Jess, Teresa is not–"
"This isn't about Teresa!"
"Then what–"
"It's about you, Brynne!"
"What did I do wr–"
"Oh my God!" she shouts, and she opens her hands with that 'this is so frustrating' gesture she has. "Nothing!"
"If it's not about Teresa and me then–"
"It's not about her! It's about you and the fact that I'm in…"

She grips herself in a sort of self-hug again, then turns to look at me again. Her eyes look so sad, even though she is smiling.

"I'm… It's… No, uh," She shakes her head. "You and I are… we're…" She sighs and shudders. "I care about you."
"I care about you." I say, confused.
"No, you dimwit, I'm in… I think… I think I *like* you."
"You–"
"Like, I've fallen. For you. Like… in *that* way."

Okay, she isn't really saying this, right?

My insides are tingling? What's this?

Is this like how I'd feel way back when we first met and I would see her smile that amused smile she would get at a weird turn of phrase me--or anyone else for that matter--would utter. Like how I'd feel when the light would sparkle in her eyes when we were eating in the school cafeteria, and I would space out while she was talking because I was just staring at her gorgeous face?

"Oh." I say.
"Oh? That's all you have to say?"
"Wow, I'm… dense, aren't I?"
"Yes!" she says, laughing. "I think... I'm in–"

“Guys, we gotta get moving.” Barney shouts from the porch.

Jessica’s face warps into a grimace, her eyes dark and flinty. She turns and gives Barney a murderous glare.

“What?” he asks, confusion written across his face. “Just saying we need to get moving if we’re going to do this thing today.” He shrugs. “The others are already loading into the car, so come on.”

Jess makes a choking symbol with her hands in the air before waving him away. She turns back to me and her grimace fades.

“Brynne,” she whispers.
“Jess, I–”
“I know.” she says, and she nods. “He’s right, we better get moving.”

She takes off as fast as she can toward the house, rounding the corner toward where the car is parked.

Leaving me here, confused and…

Well, just confused.

Is she really saying she...well, she feels the way about me the way I have always felt about her, even if I had to hide those feelings away at the back of my soul? Maybe I’m imaging, or… or misunderstanding her.

No, this is just because she has been through so much these past months, right? I mean… but what if it’s not because of that? What if she really…

I can’t do anything now. I can’t… *think* about this now. It’s going to make me go nuts, and… it won’t even matter what she really feels if we all wind up dead because I was too distracted.

***

I couldn’t concentrate as Claudia guided us to the camp. It wasn’t far away, just a short car trip. The fact is, we probably could have just ran there.

I stared out the window, away from Jessica, as we rode along. Not thinking about it wasn’t going so well, and I couldn’t figure out if she

really meant it or if it was some kind of sick joke. But Jess wouldn't do that to me. And I didn't know what to do with that information.

When we get to the place we're parking--a half mile away from the camp, near a busy highway so the sound of our car wouldn't alert anyone--we split into three groups. Bernice is the one who chooses the groups, and we all agree without comment. Barney will stay with the car, Teresa and Bernice would go one way, Jess and Celeste another.

And I wound up with Claudia.

Of course I did.

Teresa groans in protest, but doesn't say anything. The fact is, I'm not sure she's even up to this anyway. Jess looks at me and her eyes bore into me, seeming to beg me to argue this arrangement. I don't, though.

We set out to surveil the section of the camp we have been assigned. Having not seen the camp, I have no idea what part that is. I only know it is the part nearest to our parking spot.

"I haven't been to this place in years." Claudia says. She laughs and pokes me with her elbow. "Last time I visited I had a rather good evening with a hot man from Vegas. Oh that man knew how to make me purr, that's for sure."

She laughs again, loudly. It disturbs me that she suddenly feels close enough to me that she would reveal her steamy encounter. It also worries me that she is speaking so loudly.

"You're going to be heard, Claudia." I say softly.

"Yes, well," She stops in the path and laughs loudly. Her eyes glisten, and she raises her hand to touch a brooch that she has fastened on her sweater. "Perhaps you're right."

She giggles, which is slightly quieter, and her eyes move over the area while she smiles a creepy looking smile. She takes a deep breath, then walk on, humming as she goes.

That's when I hear it: a barghest.

Do those things know where we are at all times? How did it find us so quickly?

“Why now?!” I whisper.
“Ah yes,” Claudia says, smiling. “Why now.”

She laughs, then hurries away from me. I think about racing after her, but she seems to know the woods better than I do, and she disappears almost immediately.

Leaving me all alone to fight the coming barghest. And I am suddenly far too busy to worry about a cowardly move by Claudia.

When the barghest emerges from the trees I am ready. Or try to be, anyway. It doesn’t so much as growl at me, it just stares with its fiery eyes and does that thing where it fluctuates in transparency.

“I still don’t understand how you do that.” I mumble to it. “I’ll have to have Celeste explain it to me someday.”

It steps closer, its mouth hanging open in a snarl, saliva dripping from the torn flesh under its chin.

Disgusting creatures.

And then it pounces. I try to jump aside, but it is too quick. That is saying a lot, seeing as how I am a vampire and all. We struggle, it snapping at my mouth and shoulder, me holding it off each time.

Until it tears into my arm, forcing me to let it go. I grab at it again, and by some miracle I manage to poke it in the eye.

Despite how they look, their eyes don’t burn. Or at least I don’t feel any warmth as I take advantage of my lucky shot and shove my fingers harder against the eye. It tries to back away, but I have it firmly grasped in my other hand. It whips back and forth, but it can’t tear free. And when I finish with the first eye, I move to the second.

And then I step back and watch as the now-blind barghest snips at me and snaps at thin air.

“Not so easy to fight when you can’t see me, is it?” I ask it.

It whips its head back and howls loudly into the air. My first worry is that the lamia camp will hear. My second worry comes when I hear several other barghest in the distance respond with howls of their

own.

“Not good.” I mumble.

I hurry around the side of the barghest and jump at it. I grab its neck and squeeze as tightly as I can. My hope is to choke it to death, but its neck is incredibly thick and strong. Instead, I end up twisting around until I hear a loud crack and the barghest goes limp.

As the body of the dead barghest drops to the ground, the sound of other fights taking place deeper in the forest gets my attention.

An ambush?

How did they know we were coming? I didn’t even know the barghest were smart enough to make coordinated plans like that.

I dart toward the camp, hoping I’m not already too late. I hear voices screaming out--vampires *and* lamia. There are many, many voices. Too many.

I hurry toward the nearest that I recognize: Teresa’s. I pass by several cars, a small shack, and two dog houses before I burst into a clearing.

Blood.

Tons of blood.

There are about twenty lamia surrounding Teresa and Bernice, who are fighting with two barghest. The lamia are screaming and taunting, even throwing things at Teresa and Bernice.

I hurry into the group, even though we were horrifically outnumbered to the point of certain death. I would rather die trying to save my friends than live with the knowledge that I let them die alone.

I take down one of the lamia easily. *Surprisingly* easily. I don’t enjoy killing, will *never* enjoy killing, but it felt very… fulfilling to hear the neck of that lamia girl as I broke it. One more lamia down, this time by crushing his skull with a nearby rock. I now have the attention of the others.

And then the cavalry comes.

All of the rest of our group, sans Claudia the coward, rushes into the clearing. Some of them are being followed by barghest, but they come. So do five more vampires, who are immediately fighting at my side.

And we win. In bloody fashion, we win. One of the vampires who came to our aid lost her life in the process, but we take down an entire camp of lamia and their barghest pets with no other losses.

I help Teresa to her feet and poke at a nasty rip that runs up the entire length of her left thigh. I hear the others checking their wounds around us.

“Thank you folks for coming to our aid.” Bernice pants to the new vampires in our midst.
“Glad to be of help.” A tall man with an Indian accent says. “These bastards had it coming for pulling this after playing nice with us.”
“Playing nice?” Jess asks. She is three feet away, staring at me.
“Yeah,” a small girl in their group says, laughing humorlessly. “I never really bought it, though.”
“Belinda is the nervous type.” a second female vampire in their group explains. “That’s why we didn’t believe her.”

We gather into our collective groups, us on one side and them on the other. All of their group seem to be waiting on the second female to speak for them, and after a moment she steps up and extends her hand to Bernice.

“Juanita.” she says.
“Bernice.”

While they are shaking hands, our groups mutter introductions to each other. I take a moment to wrap a shirt that I pull from a dead lamia around Teresa’s leg.

“Where is Claudia?” Bernice asks.
“She took off when the barghest attacked.” I explain. “I haven’t seen her since.”
“So she just bounced when the bad guys hit?” Belinda asks. “Nice friend.”
“Yeah, uh,” I say, looking around. “She is the one who led us… here.”
“Barney.” Jess says, shooting off into the trees.

I follow.

Jess is there before I am, but I'm not very far behind her when we get to the car. Barney is not in it, as he is supposed to be. It takes a moment for me to locate him, standing twenty feet behind the car.

With Claudia's arm wrapped around his neck from behind.

"Let him go!" Jess shouts.
"Stay back!" Claudia replies, laughing. "One little twist and pretty boy is all done."
"Don't," I say. I raise my hands up in a placating fashion. "Nobody is coming near you. Just don't do anything rash."
"Rash?" she says. She laughs a hearty laugh, her head tilted back. "You come after us, you kill our people, and you expect me to just…" She laughs again. "It was so easy. But *you* just are the luckiest little bitches I've ever seen!" Another, crazier laugh. "How the hell are you still standing?"
"What are you talking about?" Barney chokes out.
"Talking about, pretty boy?" Claudia says. "I'm talking about the fact that your girls here are still standing. My friends weren't supposed to let that happen."
"Friends?" I ask.
"How the hell did you survive dozens of our people and their pets, girls? Huh? Tell me that much."
"Lets just sit and talk about this." I say, stepping one step closer.
"Ah-ah," she says, making a slight motion, as if she were going to twist Barney's neck. "Don't make me do anything rash."

Her laughs are unnerving. I can't understand how anyone can laugh during something like this. She is insane, that's for sure, but I still don't quite get it.

"Claudia?" Bernice asks.

I have been focusing so hard on Barney not dying that I didn't even notice the others join us along the road. A quick check and my entire group and part of the friendly vampires are just behind me.

"It's not *fair*!" Claudia says.
"What isn't fair?" I ask.
"I heard about… *you*," she says, pointing. "You and your people are killing *my* kind. Miranda says they killed three before we ever–"
"Miranda?!" Bernice says. She shakes her head. "Oh Claudia, what did you do?"
"I didn't have to do anything, Bernice, I just… Miranda promised

she'd take care of everything, all I had to do was get them–"
"You set this up?" Jess asks, her voice dripping with anger.
"You lying bitch!" Teresa screams at her. "Where are my parents?"
"I'll ne-ver te-ell." Claudia sing-songs. She smiles wide. "You're all a part of this, even pretty boy here."
"She lied to you, Claud." Bernice tells her. "Can't you see that?"
"No, she wouldn't. She promised, and…" She shakes her head, her smile faltering for a second. "She was telling the truth. I *know* she was."

It is Belinda.

Two tenths of a second is about the amount of time it takes for Belinda to fly in from the side, break Claudia's arm, jaw, and several ribs, before she slams her to the ground with a loud crack that can only be her back snapping against the dirt and breaking.

"Claudia!" Bernice shouts, racing to her side.

Jess and I run to Barney's side, bending over him where he lay on the dirt. He seems okay, but the wind is knocked out of him and he is rubbing his neck.

"Be-berni–" Claudia begins, having trouble because her jaw isn't working right.
"Don't talk, Claudia. Don't." Bernice tells her.
"Sor-ry." Claudia says. "I…" She rasps out, choking and coughing up blood. Hearing her suck in air makes *my* chest hurt. "Be-liev-ed Mir–"
"I know. It's okay, Claudia. It's okay."
"Not." Claudia says. Her eyes are full of blood "Damn!" she proclaims.
"Claudia, hang on."

But there is no hanging on. There is nothing. No breathing. No rasping. No painful, sucking sounds as her lungs try to expand. Nothing.

No more Claudia.

***

When we finish burying Claudia--Bernice insisted--we gather back at the house, our new vampire friends in tow. Bernice has stopped crying long enough to apologize to all of us for what Claudia did, though I have no idea why she feels it is her responsibility to do so. Honestly, it

seems to me like she was lied to as much as we were. It isn't her fault Claudia was a mess and a victim.

"What do we do now?" Celeste asks.
"Whatever it is," Barney says. He turns his face away from the iPad he pilfered from the lamia site for the first time in an hour, "It better be fast. Fifty dead in a massacre in a town in nowhere Iowa."
"Fifty?" Juanita asks, her eyes going wide.
"It's a bloodbath." Barney tells me. "Your name was found in five places."

No.

No, please.

"Omaha." the man with the Indian accent says. "I think I heard them talking with someone in Omaha. You should check there."

Friday, September 12

We've been in the area for a day now and we already know there are at least two dozen vampires, a half dozen barghest, unknown numbers of lamia, a ton of VI agents, and God only knows how many federal or local police agents all working out of a huge house on the edge of town.

Jess has tried to talk to me twice about what she told me, and both times I told her we were too busy to talk about it. I honestly don't know how to react. I did have a crush on her, and I don't even remotely think I am over that completely. I learned to deal with it, and I've sort of put it behind me as well as I can.

Her feelings worry me. I know Jess so well, and I know she would never mean to hurt me, but I also know that she could hurt me by accident. Easily. What if this is just her being confused by the fact that she just lost her parents and she is scared of losing anyone else, including a best friend? And with everything else going on, and the fact that she and Barney are in mortal danger every moment… I mean she is just extremely emotional right now, and I worry that it is just messing with her.

But what if it's not? What if she really does have feelings for me now? Why all of a sudden, though, I can't figure out. And then there's Teresa, who I was one-hundred percent certain was my perfect love, but now I don't really know. She's different now. She has changed, and I can't even begin to figure out completely how. I know that it may be me who changed, but that doesn't alter the fact that it doesn't feel the same as before. So what do I even do with that now?

So anyway, we now have to go up against fifty or more people, and we have to do it soon. A lot of people are dying. Every news broadcast has coverage of the killings, which number in the hundreds now. Each day has at least one or two, though luckily we haven't had a repeat of how bad it was in that town a couple of days ago.

We need more help. The only problem is that we can't really trust anyone. The vampires who were with the lamia--the ones who helped us kill them--stayed behind in Wyoming. Bernice remained with them too. So it is just us. For now, anyway.

"Can't we just bomb the hell out of them?" Barney asks.

"Where would we get a bomb that size?" Teresa asks him. "And they have my parents."

"Oh yeah, forgot about your parents." he says. "Damn."

"We don't even know if Marissa and Miranda are in there." Celeste chimes in. "They should be our primary concern."

"Cut off the snake's head and the snake dies." Barney agrees.

I'm not so sure that analogy holds up. As far as we know, the others may continue to just kill and go about things like Marissa and Miranda are now. but it's a good place to start. We can take care of the others in the aftermath.

"What we really need is someone on the inside." Celeste suggests.

"A little late to try for that." Jess tells her. "So what we have to figure out is how to locate Marissa and Miranda and go after them directly, and ignore the number of others in there."

"Or we could wait for Bernice and Juanita to build the army they were going to build so they can help us." Barney offers.

"I don't like that one." Teresa says. "Not with my parents in there somewhere."

"So what do we do?" Celeste asks. "We have to do something."

"Before they find us." Teresa agrees, nodding.

We have been very, *very* careful to make sure that we aren't found out. The biggest impediment to this has been the barghest. Those things are amazing trackers, and if they were actually looking for us here in town I am completely certain they'd find us.

"I have an idea, but it's risky." I say.

I spend the next three hours trying to convince them.

And after that, I make it clear I am doing it whether they like it or not.

Saturday, September 13

I am nervous. Everyone in our group has asked, begged, then threatened whatever they could think of to try to get me to stop, but I have to do it.

I text Marissa that we are heading back to Kansas City, and if she and Marissa will meet me alone in the Worlds of Fun parking lot at midnight three days from now, I will turn myself over to them.

She, of course, wants proof that I am there before she goes to the trouble of showing up. I promise to text a pic of myself there as proof if they agree to come. She says she will, and she promises it will be just her and Miranda, as long as they could see that it was just me there. If they show up and I am not alone, they will stay hidden, and call all their friends up to begin the full-scale slaughter.

"Do you really think this is going to work?" Teresa asks. "It seems ridiculous to me, Brynne. I don't like it at all."
"It's the only way." I tell her.
"You're just going to turn yourself over and be killed!"
"I'm kind of hoping it doesn't go quite that way."
"You are risking a lot of lives with this." Celeste tells me. She runs a hand through her hair, then gives me a wavering smile. "You're a brave girl, Brynne, but the only difference between bravery and stupidity is the outcome."
"And this may be stupidity." Barney completes her thought.
"I know. But it has to be done."
"I'll come with you." Jess says. She sits beside me and puts a hand on my arm. "Let me come with you, honey."

She would come with me if I ask, of course she would. But she can't. And I can't let her. Because she needs to be here. She is the only one I can trust to lead what will be happening here.

"I need you here." I tell her.
"I'm not letting you go alone."

“I’m not.” I say. “Look, I need you to coordinate things here, okay? Please?”

“But–”

“I’ll take Teresa to watch my back.”

“You’ll…” Jess pauses. She lowers her head and her voice quavers as she says, “Yeah,” She backs away. “Sure.”

I don’t know how to read her anymore. I can’t tell what she’s thinking, and it bothers me. I just don’t understand. She’s upset with me, I think, but I can’t tell why.

“Celeste, you are going to be the contact point for the others.”

“Affirmative.” she replies, nodding.

The *others* would be the group we met in Wyoming. We talked to them last night, they are heading our way to lend assistance. Bernice thinks she can gather a few others to help out, too. Hopefully it will be enough. The whole operation is risky.

“Barney, you’ll have to drive us. Teresa and I don’t drive.”

“Got it.” he says, a smile crossing his face.

“Does everyone know their jobs?” I ask. I get a round of nods in reply.

“I still don’t like this.” Teresa whines. “And if you insist on going through with it, I want to stay here to try to find my parents.”

“No!” Jess snaps at her. “You are going to go and make sure Brynne is safe.”

“I jus–”

“And *I swear to God* if you screw this up and she gets hurt, I will end you.”

To shocked looks all around, Jessica stands and storms out of the room. I have no idea what she is so angry about. Teresa is annoying sometimes, but she’s just scared. I know she’s jealous, or something, but I don’t have time to take care of that now. I can’t explain everything to her, and I’m not ready for that long and emotional conversation.

I still don’t even know what to say.

Tuesday, September 16

All set, I make my way, warily, along the road leading down to the World's of Fun parking lot, just north of the park itself. I know they are already out there, waiting for me. And I also am reasonably confident that they won't jump out at me until much later, after I have a chance to text a picture showing that I'm here.

That's when they'll come for me.

That's when they will know I'm alone.

And here goes.

I send a quick text to Barney & Jess, then I send a text with a picture of me in the parking lot of Worlds of Fun to Marissa. In the background you can barely make out the outline of a roller coaster--The Patriot, I think--and the towers of some ride sticking up, both barely visible in the dark. To that, I add a second picture of a trash can with the roller coaster on it, to prove that is where I was.

Then I wait.

About three minutes.

That's when I hear the growl. Through the black parking lot I see a pair of glowing eyes. Then another. Then four more sets.

"Thought those things didn't like the night." I mumble, repeating a thought I remember having before.

Were we misinformed, or have they been forced or trained to go against their nature? Well, they aren't rushing at me, at least.

Then I hear footsteps. *A lot* of footsteps. Before long I can see that I was correct, Marissa and Miranda sent an army instead of coming alone, like they were supposed to.

No matter, I didn't really expect them to.

"Hey there, girlfriend." I hear Marissa yell out.

I didn't really expect them to come at all. This might be bad. I expected a large group to be sent after me, weakening the troops at their base of operations. I expected the sisters to stay behind, but I am supposed to be a distraction, a decoy.

Did they all come after me instead?

The idea was to get Teresa's parents out, maybe to weaken the Satan Sisters' group, and--in a far away twinkle of hope--take down the sisters themselves. There was no version of this plan that involved Jess and the others staying behind to attack the group's base, yet going in and finding no one there anymore because they all came after me.

Well crap.

"Marissa." I finally reply. I manage to keep my voice from wavering. "Good to see you."
"Yes," she drawls out in a fake southern accent, for some reason. "So you actually did it?" she asks, laughing. "You just turned yourself in!"
"Stupid, suicidal child." Miranda says. "I'm going to have so much fun making you suffer over what you did to Alejandro."
"I only did what I had to do to protect people, Miranda." I tell her. "You can't just go around killing people."
"Can't we?" she asks Marissa. They are becoming much clearer as they get nearer to me. "I think we can, what about you sis?"
"I'm kind of enjoying it." Marissa replies, smiling.

I look around at the group of vampires and barghest closing in on me. There aren't any lamia, as far as I can see. The problem is there are about ten barghest and more vampires than I can count, and they have me completely surrounded.

Crap again!

"No way out, girly." Marissa says, pleasure in her voice. "And now you get to–"

She is cut off by the sound of an engine revving. A pickup truck flies into the lot at a hundred miles per hour, it's headlights off. Some of

the vampires leap out of the way, but not all. None of the barghest do.

The truck plunges into the crowd, the grill guard on the front sending vampires flying and completely breaking the barghest to pieces. I take off running toward the park, taking advantage of the confusion.

This *was* part of the plan. Barney would mow down a group of them, then speed off. I would bolt. Unfortunately, I didn't expect the barghest. They are quite fast. Part of them were squished by the truck, but not all.

I race toward a fence, then jump as high as I can to reach the top. I grasp it and pull myself over just before they get to me. But the barghest don't have the limitations I do, and they clear the fence in a single bound.

Not good.

I hurry under the Spinning Dragons coaster, then across the bridge near the Bamboozler, and down the path. One barghest almost catches me, but it butts into the wall as I turn quickly behind a group of buildings.

Then one is on me. I kick and punch at it, hoping it will let go before its buddies get to me. Before the vampires--who are shouting in the distance--have figured out where I am.

I grab its leg and pull it sideways, breaking it. I wasn't sure it would work, but it did, and the barghest lets go of my thigh and limps in a circle. As it is doing that, as the others close in, I leap up onto the patio of a barbecue place, then up to grab the roof of the porch, pulling myself up as the injured barghest once again pounces at me and grips my left foot.

"Let. Me. Go!" I cry.

I kick at it with my right foot. It lets go of my left foot and I scramble up onto the roof. I don't have time to figure out if the creatures will be able to get up here, I just run. Across the roof of the building, I dodge massive air conditioning units, then to the south end.

That's where I take a leap of faith.

If the rest of the barghest have decided to circle around that end of the building, or if the vampires have already figured things out and are waiting for me, I am dead.

But they aren't.

I land, turning my ankle slightly as I do a forward roll. Back up on my feet, I speed between two buildings, leaping some low fences that I know won't slow down any of the barghest--with the exception of the one I injured. I emerge near the Detonator.

I scramble around that, then head toward the children's area, with giant Peanuts characters that seem very creepy in the dark.

And then there is movement to one side.

A vampire, dressed in all black, racing my way. Then grabbing my arm as I hurry by. I tug and pull, trying to free myself before I am barghest food. I spin and land a punch, but the vampire is a rather large, linebacker type.

And then he is smashed in the head with a trash can.

"Go!" Teresa shouts.

I go. She follows, and we hurry through, now getting to the Mamba. Under it, over a fence, and into the parking lot that is on that side of the park.

Into the back of the waiting pickup.

"Drive!" I shout to Barney.

***

"You're gushing blood." Teresa says. "We have to stop this before–"
"I'm okay." I tell her. "Barney, slow down."

It has been fifteen minutes, and I have seen no sign that we are being followed yet. But if we keep going the speed we are, we are sure to get the attention of law enforcement, which could get ugly. I don't think we'd just get a speeding ticket. Not with blood and guts on our front bumper and a bleeding girl in the back.

A bleeding, *wanted* girl in the back.

“I don’t think Jess is going to have any luck finding your parents, Teresa. I’m sorry. I doubt there’s anyone there. Even if they are, Marissa will have warned them by now. I’m calling off the attack.”
“No. Brynne, please don’t. Let them try, at least. Maybe they will–”

That’s when we are completely blindsided by a huge SUV. It slams into the side of us as it comes down off the We spin around in a complete circle, come to a stop, then are hit again by a second SUV.

I slide over the side, out of the back of the pickup. Two vampires crawl from each vehicle. Barney manages to make his way from the pickup, and he unloads five shots into one of them, right in the head, dropping that one to the ground for the time being.

I jump at the second one from that vehicle, trying my best to take him down. But I struggle. He isn’t particularly strong, just has very long arms and knows how to use them, on top of having quite a big knife. But I am getting better at fighting, with all my recent experience, and I am able to flip him over and smash his head into the ground, shattering his skull and disabling him for now.

As I turn I see the other two vampires are working over Barney and Teresa. I grab the knife from the one I just took down and slice into the one attacking Teresa. I thrust it at him, attempting to stab him in the chest, but as I swing he dips and turns, and I end up shoving the eight-inch blade right up under his chin, all the way up to the hilt. He flops around, tugging at the blade, but is no longer a threat.

Teresa and I turn on the one with Barney. He has bloodied Barney’s nose, and Barney’s right arm hangs limp in a bloody mess from his shoulder. I grab the vampire’s head, Teresa grabs the body, and we twist. He may survive it, but he won’t be walking for at least a few days.

Barney screams and grabs onto his right arm with his left hand. I try to get a look at it, but he keeps spinning away from me and stomping.

“Son of a bitch!” he howls. “Shit! Oh dammit!”
“We’ve got to go, Barney.” I tell him.

I look around and see that our pickup is not going to be moving again. The nearest one of the two SUVs that hit us looks… somewhat mobile,

and so I herd him toward it.

“No way am I driving.” he says. “Can’t do it. Hell, I can barely see.”

With no other option, I get behind the wheel. It is kind of crazy, I’m not going to lie, but I have to get us out of here.

I manage to do OKOK, and we drive for a while before I turn off the highway. We hide along a country road, pulling the SUV in behind a group of trees.

“Holy hell, this hurts!” Barney moans again.

Teresa and I had manage to lay him down across the back seat. She gives him some aspirin she found in the glove box, but we don’t dare take him to the hospital.

“You can help him.” Teresa tells me.
“I can… what?”
“You can change him.” she says, shifting back and forth. “It would heal him. I know it would, I saw it heal my father’s bad knee.”
“Teresa, I… no, I just–” I look down at Barney, asking with my eyes if he wants me to.
“No!” he says, his teeth gritted. “Don’t you dare, Brynne. No.”
“I won’t, Barney.” I whisper. “If you don’t want me to.”
“I don’t.” he grumbles. “Now call Jess and see what the hell is going on with them. We should have heard back by now.”

I try to call. Twenty times, I try. Still no answer. What is going on? How can she not call me back, at least?

“I’m worried.” I whisper so low that I know Barney won’t hear, but Teresa will. “Something happened.”

Wednesday, September 17

We get back to Omaha just after dawn, and I can immediately notice that there are way more people here than I expected. Like, *way more*. My muscles tighten, and I feel my adrenaline pumping as I prepare for flight.

But Jess.

I can't leave Jessica. I won't leave her behind, no matter what. I'll just have to send Teresa and Barney away so they will be safe while I stay behind to save Jess.

"Hey there, boss lady." Bernice shouts, banging on my window and making me jump in the seat. She has a huge smile on her face.
"Who are these people?" I ask her.
"What's that?" she asks. I roll the window down and repeat the question to her. "Oh, well, seems we have a few new recruits now, doesn't it?"
"These are–"
"Y'all ain't looking so hot. Mayhap we get the fella inside to doc."

I nod and pull the car to the side, then Teresa and I gingerly haul Barney inside, Bernice--using a crutch--leading the way. We get Barney settled in a room that has been set up as a bit of an infirmary.

"What's with the leg?" I ask Bernice.
"Aw, pshaw, *this!*" She shakes her head and lets out a belly laugh. "Just a flesh wound, nothing to it."
"She almost lost a leg in the fight." a voice says behind us.

I spin and see Jess laying on a bed. Well, on a table with some blankets and a pillow. She doesn't look well, but she seems whole, at least. And as pretty as the first time I ever met her.

"Jess!" I hear myself exclaim, and before I know it I'm hugging her.
"I'm okay, hon." she assures me.

“Barney–”
“What about Barney?!” she snaps, her whole body tightening. “Where is he?” she starts to move, but I hold her in place. “Is he–”
“He’s alive.” I tell her. “It’s okay. He’s, um,” I let go and step aside so she can see him across the room. “He’s not well, though.”
“He… he… he, um–”
“He’ll live.” I said. “At least I think so. But we have to let the doctors take care of him.”
“Oh.”

She turns pale, and it doesn’t help when the doctors arrive at that exact moment to take Barney off to work on him. Jess acts like she wants to follow, but they make her stay behind.

“What happened to him, Brynne?” Jess asks.

I sit next to her and start filling her in on the details. I only get to the part where I turned and ran into the park when I am interrupted by a loud squeal.

“You’re alive!” Teresa yells.
“We’re fine.” Sabrina tells her. “Are you okay, Teri?”
“I am now.” Teresa tells her.

Teresa, her mother, father and brother all move to the other room, and I hear Andre complaining about losing part of a finger to a barghest, but otherwise fine.

“So what happened here?” I ask Jess.
“Bernice arrived just before we were going in.” she explained. “She managed to gather some new allies.”
“A lot, from what I saw?” I ask.
“Over seventy.” Jess confirms. “The attack on the house went badly at first, and we lost some people. Seven from the new recruits. Two vampires, four lamia, and someone who is a… well, I don’t even know what. But everyone else made it.”

She was looking up as she explained, and I glanced at the curve of her neck. The week after we met, when I had just transferred into school, we were in the library, and she was helping me with research on a paper, helping me catch up to the rest of the class, who had started the project a month earlier. She was explaining that I had to have five sources, and that she thought she knew another one I could use. She had looked up that exact same way back then, and I wanted so much

to reach across the library table that day to caress that soft, wonderful, delicate curve.

I didn't, of course. And then she looked down and I looked away quickly. Ever since then, I've always wondered if she even for one second thought I was looking at her a little too affectionately.

That day, having just met her and knowing little about her except for how flustered I got in her presence and how sweet and kind she was, I remember deciding that I would stick around for a while. I don't think I understood myself or my feelings fully at the time, or at least I was lying to myself about it, but a part of me knew this girl was going to break my heart.

I also remember blushing a lot when she looked down.

"You turn red so easily." Jess suddenly says, interrupting her explanation.
"It was nothing, just go on." I tell her, realizing that I am blushing *now* just thinking back on that day.
"I broke my leg, and it hurt like Hell. Though it is actually healing really quickly."
"How'd–"
"Got pushed backward when a barghest leaped on me, and my foot got caught in a hole in the wall. Don't ask." She shook her head. "Broke my left hand too, also on that same barghest."

I could still hear Teresa's family sobbing a couple of rooms over. I'm so glad they are back together now.

"We need to talk about something." I tell Jessica.
"Talk later." A doctor tells me. "She needs some sleep, and I need to check you over."

I move over to the desk that we had spread Barney on when we first came in, and I watch as the doctor gives Jess an injection of tranquilizer. She mumbles something, then falls asleep within seconds.

The doctor moves to me and begins tugging at my clothes, checking abrasions and cleaning them up. He's gentle, like he thinks he's going to hurt me.

"She's really okay?" I ask, nodding over to Jessica.
"She'll be fine. It will take a few weeks for her bones to knit, but she's

young and healthy."

A few weeks? I take it he isn't used to dealing with vampires?

When he finishes, I lay there and look at Jess, and I remember all the lonely days and nights I had before I knew her. Before I knew her randomness--which she has lost a bit of lately. I hope she gets that back soon.

I remember a day, maybe two years ago, when Jess and I were sitting in the shade in their back yard. She was reading some magazine, and I was telling her about a movie I had watched--supposedly with my parents, though that part was a lie. She had fallen asleep.

I sat there and watched her, just like now. I watched the curve of her soft lips as she drifted off fully, her eyelids fluttering *just slightly*. That was when I first noticed how smooth and perfect her cute little nose was. I wanted to kiss it--right on the end. Even though I couldn't admit to myself that I was gay, I wanted to. I couldn't, I'd wake her. And by then I knew Jess was off limits.

But is she really?

And then, on that summer day, her mouth pulled up into a smile. Just a small one, but a smile still the same. She looked so angelic. So, so desperately beautiful. I think I almost did kiss her. Almost. But then I pulled myself out of the daze I was in and spun my head around, making sure nobody had seen me.

And now, two years on from that, she's a vampire, knows all my secrets, and has been in major battles. Ted and Peggy are dead, Barney is on an operating table somewhere, and we can never go back home. Her life, *our* lives, are so different now. The only thing not different, not in any significant way, is Jessica. My Jessica. God I hope this doesn't change her any more than it has.

Jess is safe right now. That's all that really matters in the end. When I think of it, she's the one constant for me. The one person I would absolutely do anything for. Ever since that first tour of the school, when she randomly asked me if I thought misspelling the word misspell would create a tear in the continuum and cause the end of the universe.

I remember her weird, lighthearted, *I'm really not being serious, just*

weird laugh that day. I haven't heard that version of her laugh for a while now. Will I ever hear it again, after all of this horror that she has witnessed? The idea of that wonderful part of her being destroyed forever hurts my heart.

"Celeste is in the midst of retaking the VI." Jess tells me.
"Why the hell would she want to do that?" Teresa asks.
"To use them as they were originally intended." I guess. "She could bring in people to go after the baddies."
"Whatev." Teresa says, rolling her eyes.

Barney's arm was pretty mangled. He lays in a hospital bed we had brought in, just feet away from where Jess lays, bandages wrapping the stump that remains of his arm.

I should have been able to protect him better than that. I should never have gotten him into the mess to begin with. And he will be without his arm for the rest of his life because of it.

I should have changed him. I could have. I could have forced him to agree, and if I had done it then maybe his arm would still be there, still functioning. Not maybe; probably.

But I will never do that. Never, even in the worst of circumstances, will I force this life onto someone who doesn't want it. And Barney doesn't.

No sane person ever would, not if they knew the reality of living this life.

Was this worth it?

I mean it was, if only to get Teresa's parents back. And it wasn't. A lot of people died. What did we get from it? Maybe Celeste will be able to make good use of the contacts and people involved in the VI, if she can weed out who is good and bad. That's about it.

But we also let Marissa and Miranda know we're coming for them, I guess. That is something. Not like it should have been a surprise for them, anyway, but it's something.

Hopefully.

How long have they used Omaha as their base? I mean they may have

been here all along, or they may have just been here a couple of days. If they were only here a couple of days then how much of a burden is it that they have to move on? Not much, I suspect.

But still, maybe the loss of the VI as their minions will mean something. And for sure, we have gained a lot of new allies with all the people the Wyoming group brought with them.

"Bernice wants you to come to a meeting." Some girl I never met before says from just outside the door.
"Me?" I ask. I know she isn't asking for Teresa, and Jess and Barney are neither one in condition to go.
"Yes, ma'am." the girl says.

Ma'am? I'm just a kid and she must be several years older. It just seems… wrong.

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The meeting starts an hour later, and Jess does manage to hobble in for it. Bernice starts the meeting, standing at the front with her crutch tucked under her arm. Every person able is there, outside the house on the back lawn. It is just after dark now, but all of the vampires are able to see just fine. A few of the lamia don't seem to see too well in the dark, and Celeste obviously can't, so we turned on the back light to offer as much light as we can. Not much, but it is something at least.

"I'm asking for volunteers." Celeste explains when her turn comes up. "What I'd like to do, if it's okay with Brynne, is put in place some people we can trust to run the VI. We can use this organization and all their resources to go after anyone who isn't compliant with our rules."
"Rules?" someone asks. "What rules?"
"Mostly that they don't directly harm people. No killing, no attacking, nothing. We're not going with the old hard line that the VI used to have, we're not going to try to eliminate any non-humans."

"Maybe live quietly, so nobody even knows we exist?" Bernice suggests.

"Yeah, good," Celeste continues, nodding. "I think everyone here is proof that you don't have to be human to be a good person."

That meets approval, including some clapping, from the group of assembled vampires and lamia. I wonder what kind of guts it took for her, a human, to tell a bunch of vampires and lamia that she was

taking over the organization that has been trying to destroy them their entire lives?

“Why do you need Brynne’s approval?” Jess asks.
“Well, uh,” Celeste says, glancing around the group, “Most of us kind of agreed, informally, that she really is the one who got this all started. She should be the leader of this–”
“No.” I say. “Nuh-uh. No way!”
“Well… you don’t have to do anything.” Celeste says. “Just act as a voice. A focal point. I’ll run the VI. Me and the people we choose.”
“I don’t think that makes any–”
“I think that’s a lovely idea.” Sabrina says loudly. “Your name is the one already known by everyone, anyway. And you’re the one those horrible girls are after, so you should have a leading role in whatever we are creating here. Who agrees with me?”

Most of the people there cheer, raise hands, or otherwise signal their approval.

So yeah, I’m drafted.

The thing is, all the lost lives, all the people here fighting, that's all on me. If it weren’t for me then everything would not have happened and we’d all be living our lives as peaceably as before, never having met each other.

So how can I turn it down?

Still, I got Barney’s arm mangled so badly that he lost most of it. I cost Ted and Peggy their lives. I cost *so many people* their lives.

And the whole idea of luring some of them to Kansas City was such a bad idea! Not only did it cost Barney his arm, it didn’t work. It just got more people killed.

Except, I guess, Teresa’s family were rescued. And Celeste has control over the VI again, which might be useful. Maybe.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask.
“I don’t know yet.” Celeste replies. She takes a deep breath and looks out over everybody. “I’d be happy to hear suggestions, if anyone has anything.”

Nobody does. It’s kind of weird, when you think about it, because we

have dozens of people here and people always have opinions. I guess maybe they are all in kind of a new place, and are still getting settled into the idea that we now have a base of operations and a small army to work with. Allies. We are all organized and together now, and it will make us much stronger.

“Okay then.” Celeste says. She lets out a heavy sigh and her shoulders hunch. She nibbles at her lip and shakes her head slowly. “Well then, I guess let’s spend a few days checking what we have to work with and see what we can do from there, okay?”

Saturday, September 27

I stare across the table at the FBI agent who is questioning me in a study room we reserved at the library. Jess is with me, along with one agent from the VI--a lawyer named James Stone, who Celeste had checked out and promised me I could trust. The FBI agent has two armed guards with him, two more waiting outside the building.

“I’ve checked out all your stories, at least as far as I can. I’m convinced you haven’t done anything that most people wouldn’t have done in your place.” The FBI agent, Agent Albert Donnely, tells me. “Not that anyone else would ever be in your place.” He adds. “I’m going to write this up and pass it along to my superiors back home, but from what I can see you are in the clear.”

Good that he doesn’t know everything.

“That’s good to hear, Al.” Mr. Stone says. “How long do you think it’ll be before this is passed around to the various departments around the country so that my client doesn’t have to worry about being picked up while she’s out fighting crime and doing your job?”

I worry Agent Donnely may be angry at the dig, but he just smiles and nods.

“We welcome the help when it comes to… *situations* such as this.” He looks at me for a moment, gnawing on the inside of his mouth as he thinks. “We can’t officially--or especially publicly--even admit to the existence… of these people, creatures, whatever. From what I can tell, you seem to understand the reasons why?”

I nod. Of course I know why. If the general public knew there were real vampires, lamia, barghest, striga, etcetera, they would just panic. They may attack others with the mistaken belief that they are vampires, or there could be a public outcry and call for the military to come after us. While I wouldn’t exactly be against that in some cases, there are a lot of innocent people who would be injured in the

process. Not to mention the fact that there are a lot of supernatural creatures who I've come to realize are really good people.

Such as Jess.

"So how long until she can–"
"Can't make promises on that, Jimmy, and you know it."
"Ballpark it."
"I don't know." he says, sighing. "To be honest, there is some value in maintaining the fiction that this is all being done by a group led by Brynne. At least the people back home will think so."
"Actually," I say, "That sort of works for us, too."
"Brynne, I don't think we should–"
"Mr. Stone, I… Marissa and Miranda won't know what we're doing as long as everyone keeps blaming me. Publicly, anyway."
"And if we go public with this, the two may go underground." Agent Donnely concludes for me.
"Yeah," I nod. "Though I'd appreciate it if any of our people wind up arrested while pursuing them that they be released quickly."
"Yeah, sure, I think I can arrange that."

This could help, actually. In the days since taking over as head of the VI, Celeste has rooted out the worst people, find out who was just being misled and convince them to help us, and replace the people who were involved in everything. We even managed to send them rest of them out of the country to a holding facility that the VI uses to hold people or creatures that need watched for a time. We'll figure out what to do with them later on. While I am not overjoyed at kidnapping people, they are guilty of taking part in murders, so they deserve it.

Not that anyone will ever know. The VI has a lot of good resources. That includes people within the US government, as well as many other governments around the world.

So yeah, I think those people are sitting somewhere in Indonesia right now. Maybe. Unofficially.

"I think we're done here, Al." Mr. Stone says, rising to his feet. "Anything else?"
"I think that'll do it, Jimmy. Good to see you again." He stands and extends a hand to Mr. Stone, who shakes it. "And it was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Campbell." he says to me, extending his hand in my direction for a shake. "Ms. Sloan." he says, nodding toward Jess.

“Good luck with your pursuit.”
“Thank you, Agent Donnely. It was nice to meet you.” I say.

The agent and his guards exit the room, leaving Jess, Mr. Stone, and myself sitting there in the room to stare at each other as we processed everything.

“So what now?” Jess asks.
“We keep trying to stop these two.” Mr. Stone answers.
“And then what?”
“What do you mean?” I ask her.
“Do we just go on with life at that point, or are you going to keep pursuing this? Keep trying to be the vigilante leader, the *crime fighter*, to use Mr. Stone’s words. Are you going to keep trying to root out all evil doing by those who are not quite human?”
“I hadn’t really thought that far.”
“Really?” she asks.

Her lips make a thin line for a moment, then she lets out an edgy laugh before standing quickly, sending her chair tumbling, and she stomps from the room.

Great. More drama. Someday it would be nice if I at least had some idea what the drama was. Nope. I just get to try to figure things out as I go.

Meanwhile, I have to figure out how to find the sisters. Twenty more dead in the week and a half since our raid on their headquarters.

Well, at least we’ve cut them off from the VI and the FBI.

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“So when we find them…” Celeste says, raising her eyebrows to indicate it is a question.
“They have to die.” Bernice answers.
“As painfully as possible.” Barney adds, eying the stub remaining of his arm.

He isn’t exactly pleased the doctors couldn’t save his arm, and even less so that we let them remove it without waking him and discussing it before letting them go forward. I think he understands why we did it, but he is still very angry.

“And then we…” Celeste says, pausing to look around. “We meaning the VI, go after all the others who helped them along the way.”
“What about us?” a lamia girl in the room asks. Her voice is shrill, and she avoids eye contact with everyone, as if she is afraid she will be in trouble for listening in.
“What about who?” Celeste asks her.
“Me, my people.” she says.
“Lamia?” Celeste asks. The girl nods. “Same as everyone else. We go after the bad apples so everyone else can live their lives in peace.”
“Barghest?” Bernice asks.
“Yeah, uh,” Celeste fumbles through a stack of papers nearby, pulling out a note. “We think we know where they were bred, and I think we’ll need to take that location down, but it’s sort of complicated. I will be looking for volunteers to take care of that, but I think the Satan Sisters are our top priority.”

That makes sense to me. Marissa and Miranda are killing a lot of people. We need to stop them. Soon. Now.

“What makes it so complicated?” Jess asks.
“You mean other than the load of demon dogs waiting to tear us apart?” Teresa asks her.
“Yeah, that part is kind of obvious.” Jess snaps.
“It’s in Canada.” Celeste explains. “We don’t have a lot of people there, as far as I know. I’m still working through all the files to find out who we do and don’t have serving in the VI now.”
“So we’ll take care of bitch one and bitch two first, got it.” Jess says, nodding.

That sounds easy, but taking down the sisters will be very difficult, considering we have no idea where they are. They still are somehow organizing enough people that the murders have taken place in multiple locations at once sometimes. Meaning there isn’t a lot of hope in finding just them. But we’ll keep working on it.

Sunday, September 28

"We have something." Celeste says.

She holds the phone to her ear, waiting for the person on the other end to finish. She is smiling, nodding, as the person continues. I can hear the talking, but I am not able to make out all the words.

"Right." she says, lowering the phone to her mouth. "That's right, but… No, but… Yes. Good. You too."

She hangs up the phone and scribbles some notes down. Before turning to the rest of us to explain, she hurries across to the large map she has hanging on a wall and marks a dot in next to Memphis. She adds a sticky flag with the words 'sisters sighted, 9-28' written across it.

"Someone found them?!" Barney asks.
"Well they--"
"Let's go!" He shouts, pumping his left fist in the air. "I want at least one shot."
"Whoa, whoa." Jess says, grabbing onto his shoulder. "Hang on there. I don't think you're ready to–"
"I'm ready, dammit." he says. His face is red, and he is grinding his teeth. "I'm more than ready."

We can't just run off at every little appearance. They'll be gone before we can get there. But if we get more sightings then it may give us an idea of where they are and where they are going next.

We can only hope.

"First we need to send a group to scout this area." Celeste says, pointing to a place deep in Alabama. "There have been three dead bodies show up there, and while they don't have the markers of the other murders," By which I think she means my name being left behind. "They do appear to be killings by vampires."

“I’ll go.” I say. “And maybe Bernice and Andre can go along.”
“I’m going.” Jess says. “I need to get out of here for awhile, anyway.”
“I’ll go.” Teresa volunteers. “Someone needs to watch Brynne’s back, and Andre can stay with our parents and keep an eye on them that way.”
“Sounds good.” Celeste says, nodding.
“I’d rather have Andre.” Jess mumbles, as she turns away and walks out.

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“I’d feel better about this if that…” She sighs and looks out the window. “If it were just the two of us checking on this, Brynne.”
“We need the strength of numbers, just in case there are more than one of them.” I tell her. “Plus, if they run from one of us then the rest can catch them better.”
“Because surrounding someone never made them more dangerous.” Teresa says. “Good idea there, love.”
“You know, if you don’t have anything constructive to say then just shut up, Teresa!” Jess says. “At least Brynne has some idea of what is going on.”
“Yeah, like *you’re* doing so much to help the situation.” Teresa replies.
“I’m not actively getting in the way, at least!”
“In the way? You insisted on coming, remember Jessica?”
“As I recall, it was you who–”
“Enough!” I exclaim. It is getting very, very old. “Both of you just shut up. Good grief, can’t you just… I don’t know, be nice to each other? I guess that would be too much to ask, huh?”

The two look at each other, eyes darting toward each other and away, and they seem to feel slightly guilty for how they have been acting. That’s good. I’m getting so sick of this. It’s ridiculous.

When this is all over I should just take off and be alone. It’s easier. I don’t have to deal with their childish behavior that way, at least.

But then I’d be lonely.

And I’d miss them. All of them. Not just Jess or Teresa, but Celeste and Barney as well. I have Jenna, but it’s just not enough anymore. Not nearly.

I don’t think I can handle being without Jess now. She’s my best

friend. I'd miss the others, but I think I actually need Jess. She's my… my light in the darkness. She's the only person who can slap me around and prop me up when I need it, and sometimes I need a little of both. She's the only person I trust completely and without a doubt.

And that makes me realize that I can never be with Teresa again. Not in a relationship, anyway. I still care about her--still even love her, I guess, but it'll never be enough. Because I don't trust her that way. She doesn't give me strength. She doesn't guide me when I'm out of line. Not in any way I have belief in, anyway.

She's not Jess.

Ugh!

I don't know what to do. Jess is all emotional and desperately seeking out for comfort from anyone. She misses her parents, feels lost, and because of that she is feeling confused. She can't have the feelings she says she has. I don't believe that. She dated Tony so many times, and you don't go back to the guy over and over if you aren't at least attracted to him. As in straight. As in *not gay*. She can't have those feelings she expressed.

She's just not thinking clearly right now.

It won't last.

Monday, September 29

We arrive in the area that Celeste's latest tipster spotted the vampire. It's a walled in complex in an industrial park. From the description, the vampire we are here for is a particularly large woman who is supposed to be about fifty, gray haired, and who walks hunched.

"Drop me off here." I tell Bernice. "If you drop one of us on each side of this complex We can search through here."
"I'm going with you." Teresa says. "I'll stay behind and watch your back so you don't get ambushed."
"Not happening." Jess tells her. "You came to do a job, so do it, Teresa." Jess reaches across and grips my hand, squeezing and letting go. "Be careful, hon."
"I will." I say, nodding. "You be careful too."

I climb the fence and make my way to the nearest building. My skin is tingling in anticipation. We are making a difference. We are going to take down another vampire and stopping their senseless killings.

Part of me wishes we could turn them to our side. Change their minds about their lifestyle, I guess. The only thing is, this one has been public and noticed. They are very violent toward humans. So now it's time they meet someone who is a match to them.

Or at least someone closer, I guess.

I used to think I was one of the fastest and strongest people on the planet. Then I turned Jessica into a vampire, and she was faster and stronger. I was okay with that. But now I think I'm kind of weak as vampires go.

It's weird to call myself that after denying it so long, but I am. I may be a *nice*-ish vampire, but I'm a vampire.

But anyway, I no longer feel like I'm one of the fastest or strongest. Yeah, I'm still faster than a lot of them that I've met, I think, but I'm

nowhere near as strong as most of them. Which makes me wonder: do I even stand a chance if I come across this woman and it gets ugly?

Maybe.

Maybe because I'm actually getting fairly used to fighting at this point. Maybe because I'm squirmy and quick. Maybe because just maybe I'll take her by surprise.

So yeah, maybe.

Jess would stand a chance.

Bernice would stand a chance.

Teresa would be destroyed.

Not only is Teresa not as used to fighting as the rest of us, she's also a bit of a wimp. A wimp as in scaredy-cat, not as in weak. Though she's not especially strong, either. Not compared to Jess or Bernice. But Teresa would also be destroyed because she would panic.

I shouldn't have let her come.

I stand near a window and listen intently for any sounds of movement. Nothing. Well, nothing except an excited mouse somewhere in the back, squeaking away at something.

I push on the window and it swings open easily. Apparently security is not a priority to the occupying company of this particular building. A rubber hose manufacturer, if I were to guess based on the look of things.

Inside, apart from the hose scraps, are huge machines. Some look like they haven't been used in decades, some just recently. None today, I'd guess, though I'm not sure why it wouldn't have been running on a Monday, but that isn't too important now, I suppose.

I look around, staring into the depths for any flicker of movement. Maybe I am not as strong or fast as other vampires, but one thing I am confident in is my vision. So when I don't see anyone, when I don't see any movement, I step through the factory toward the front of the building.

My feet make almost no sound on the concrete floor, and I don't hear any other foot shuffling. Even the mouse has gone silent now. Outside I hear an owl hooting in the distance, and a cat meowing for its mate.

And then the tinkling of a piece of glass tapping against the concrete on the opposite side of the building.

I turn and hurry in the direction, my eyes darting about for evidence that anyone is around. It is hard to tell if the footprints in the dust on the floor are recent or from a few days ago.

I pause and take a deep breath, trying to smell anything out of place. Nothing. Dust and oil, sure. Maybe a faint scent of mouse poo. But the scent of rubber almost overwhelms every other scent, so it would be hard to smell anyone in the building.

A tree branch taps against the side of the building nearest me, blown by a firm breeze that is howling through the seams in the building and making it even more difficult for me to locate anyone who may be there by sound alone.

I'm wasting time.

Jess and the others will be working toward the center of the complex, and I need to hurry it up or I'll be the last one there.

A few seconds later I am on the far side of the factory, looking down at a piece of glass that has fallen from the window pane.

My tinkling sound?

The glass is shiny and fresh, not covered with dust, as it would have been if it had been there any length of time. Has my sound only been the breeze blowing a loose and broken pane into the building? Apparently. There are no signs of footprints.

I use the opportunity of the nearness of the window to exit the building and head toward the center of the compound.

I search through windows and listen carefully at the next building I come across. Some kind of administrative office, based on the computers and the lack of any heavy machinery.

It never occurred to me how long it will take to find someone in a place like this. We have to do at least a cursory check of each building or we could bypass them completely and allow them to get out. We should have brought more help, I guess.

The door to the building takes only a light shove to open. It isn't without any sound, but it isn't much. Inside I find no evidence that anyone has been in the building for weeks. It looks as if the business has shut down, for some reason.

The next building is much the same. No evidence anyone has been there for a long time. Well, except for a mop handle poking through a window. I imagine a disgruntled janitor being told they no longer have a job could be the explanation for that one.

The third building, however, looks as if it was used earlier in the day. A slow walk through the office at the front reveals a desk with today's newspaper and a coffee cup that still holds half a cup of coffee. It is cold, but it seems to me like it was poured today, since the donut next to it is still here and relatively intact, minus a single bite. If it were there very long then the mice, which I hear in this building too, would have gotten to it by now.

I turn down a small hallway, sniffing at the air. Someone has a very strongly scented vanilla candle. The back office down the hallway, perhaps. And I can hear a ventilation system somewhere kicking on.

I creep down the hallway, toward a door that has a warning that anyone passing through the door must have eye protection on. I assume that leads to the plant floor.

I glance back and forth into the offices as I pass, making sure each is empty and not holding the vampire I came looking for.

I freeze.

There is a sneeze. Just on the other side of the door to the plant floor. A sneeze means someone is there.

I Pause to let my heart slow. What should I do. Call in Jess and Teresa, I suppose? What if it's just a kid who broke in? Or a worker who is doing a little night work and hid when they heard me enter? Or a dog, for that matter? Humans & vampires aren't the only things

that sneeze.

Okay Brynne, get a grip on yourself. Sitting here shaking while you imagine what may or may not be in there isn't going to get you anywhere. So just go check it out.

I take one step and I can hear a sharp intake of breath from the same direction as the sneeze. Another step, then another, and then I hear someone bang against something in the plant. Two more steps and I am at the door. I put my sweaty hand on the knob.

Please don't be the vampire.

Please *be* the vampire. It's why I'm here, after all.

One… Two… Three!

I fling open the door, expecting an immediate attack, prepared for whatever may come as well as I can be, ready to fight the vampire.

Nothing.

There is a pile of wood to the left of the door, the top shifted to one side. Shifted as if it has been banged into as someone moved quickly. Someone strong, like a vampire, not a normal someone.

I slide my hand slowly into my back pocket, reaching for the cell phone that is there. I slide the phone it up in front of me, all the while scanning the room with my eyes. The phone slips from my hand, plunking off the floor as it hits.

Well that sucks.

I look carefully around once more, and I listen for movement. Nothing. Maybe I imagined it all? Not a chance. I sniff at the air, but I can't smell anything except sawdust and chemicals.

Satisfied that whoever it is--wherever they are--I am safe enough to bend down, I lower myself toward the floor, my eyes still scanning as I go. My hand is to the floor, feeling around in the dust. I dart my eyes down for a quick glance, swing my hand over to the phone, then start up.

My eyes quickly came back up to scan the room again as I rise to

my feet. I hold the phone out before me and glance down at the screen to find Jessica's contact info.

A loud thump!

It's coming from everywhere, and it is so loud there is no escape from it. Ringing, ringing, ringing in my head, echoing around and drowning out all thoughts.

Pain.

So much pain.

I stagger forward, then fall to my knees, and my phone goes skittering across the floor. I see it slide under some kind of machine just as I am coming to the conclusion that the thump and the pain are related.

Someone bashed me in the back of the head.

I turn around, still on my knees, to face the doorway. Nothing. Nobody is there. A broken two-by-four lies on the floor, drops of blood line the concrete nearby, but there is nobody there.

I hear the door I came in through at the front slam shut. I stagger as I make my way to my feet, then move across to get my phone.

Which, of course, is in three pieces.

I shake my head and reach to test the wound as I make my way toward the front of the building. I will not let that thing get away. I won't.

As I stumble from the building I can hear a female laugh coming from the direction of the middle of the industrial park. So she thinks she is being funny, apparently.

Great.

Why does that tick me off so much? I mean it just really, really irritates me! Yeah, it's funny to hit someone. It's funny to fight with me. It's funny to kill innocent people?

I race toward the sound, weaving between buildings, knowing

that my friends will soon hear us and cut her off, which will render this a lot less funny.

I catch up to the woman as we come into a small clearing between several buildings. She turns toward me, ready for the confrontation.

And that persistent, irritating, grating laugh comes again.

I hate this woman, this monster. I don't like to think of myself as capable of true hatred, but I do hate her.

I will *end her*.

My first leap at her is met with a chuckle, as she shoves me away from her. I slip as I dart toward her again, and she adds to the problem by tripping me as I pass, sending me sprawling.

More laughs.

I lay there for a second, trying to figure out the best way to take this woman down. I should call out for Jess and Bernice, but I need to be the one to take her down.

But then it occurs to me that I a hear more laughing than I should be. Several *different* laughs, in fact.

I glance up as I get back to my feet, and I see that I am surrounded by four vampires–five if you include the one I was chasing.

Not good.

Even worse, Marissa and Miranda are among them.

Well this sucks.

"Nice to see you again, Brynne." Marissa says. She smiles as she looks over at Miranda, then winks at her. "Isn't it, sis?"

"Quite." Miranda says.

"Wish I could say the same." I reply.

"It's amazing how silly you are, little girl." Marissa goes on. "I cannot believe you fell for this again."

"That makes two of us." I mumble. "Why are you doing this,

Marissa?" I ask, louder.

"Why? Oh my dear, I think you know why."

She, and the other vampires, start walking in a slow circle around me. Some male vampire I don't know kicks rocks and twigs--whatever he comes across--toward me, and they all chuckle at me dodging them.

I am so dead.

"You're kind of not looking so hot there." Marissa says to me. "Sorry Rachelle roughed you up a bit. No matter, I was going to do it myself anyway."
"Are you going to talk my ear off, or was there a bigger plan here?" I ask her.
"So, ready to die?"
"It's better than hearing your voice one second longer." I shoot back.
"Alright then," she says. She looks around to the others. "This is all mine."

She approaches me, reaching into her back pocket for something. A knife. She holds it out toward me as she creeps closer.

It sings in an arc. She lunges toward me.

"Nice try." I say, leaning back away from her.
"Hm, I'm just getting started, babe."

She dives at me, and manages to rake the blade across the top of my thigh as I retreat. Not a deep cut, but a painful one all the same. I grab her arm and twist, trying my best to break it. Instead, she just spins out of my grasp and plunges the blade into my left bicep.

"This would be so much better on you if you just gave up." Marissa pants. "I'll make it fast."

"You actually expect me to do that?" I ask. "You obviously don't know me."

Talking big is easy, but a part of me just wants to give up and let her win. Honestly, it would be so much easier. No more pain, no more worry.

But I'm still working on making up for my mistakes before I have to face judgement.

“Have it your way,” she says, swinging the knife at me again, missing by only an inch. “Bitch.”

I back away from her again. Miranda is there. She laughs and shoves me back toward Marissa. I stumble and fall into her. As I do so, she plunges the knife into me once more, this time into my stomach.

“Oooh, that looks painful.” Marissa says, twisting the handle. “Sure you don’t want to give up.”
“Go. To. Hell.” I grit out.

I sweep her legs with my foot, knocking her down to the side. Unfortunately, in her fall she yanks the blade sideways, tearing across my stomach. I fall to the ground next to her, clutching at my gushing belly. My innards feel like they are trying to become outards. I hope I can make it through just long enough to take down at least Marissa so this isn’t all for nothing.

There is a loud scream from the man. I look over just and see that both of his legs are amputated above the knee. Bernice stands near him with what looks like a sickle in her hand. She moves on to Rachelle, the female vampire who bashed me in the head, and slices her throat and shoves her to the ground.

“What the…” Marissa begins.

The other female vampire who is with the sisters goes down, as both Teresa and Jessica bury axes in her back.

They came. They arrived in time, and they managed a surprise attack. Oh thank God!

Marissa is to her feet quickly. She moves toward her sister. Jess and Teresa kneel next to me. Teresa looks at my stomach, as Jess pulls my head against her.

“You’re going to be okay.” Jess promises, her tears dripping onto me. “You can heal, right?”
“Yeah.” I mumble.
“Holy crap, you’re torn up.” Teresa says softly. She pulls my hand partially away from my stomach so she can see the damage. “Sorry we didn’t get here sooner, love.” Her voice has fear in it.
“Ten more seconds and I had her.” I say, trying to smile. “Go after

them." I tell them.
"What about…" Bernice asks, motioning toward the three disabled, but still very much alive, vampires.
"I'll take care of them." I say. "Just go."
"I'm not leaving you here alone." Jessica tells me.
"Me either."
"You guys, we're going to lose them!" I shout. I wave my hand in the direction Marissa and Miranda went. "Go!"
"We can't do–"
"Jess, just go! I'll be right behind you."

Bernice tugs on Jessica's arm. Jess and Teresa look at each other for a moment, then nod in unison and stand. Bernice pulls a lighter from her pocket and holds it out to me.

"Be careful not to let them get a hand on you." she says.
"I will."

I take the lighter and let her help me to my feet. As they race away, I make my way to a nearby flatbed truck. There is a tire iron on the back, as well as a plastic soda cup from a Quik Trip. I use the tire iron to poke a hole the driver's side gas tank and fill the cup from the fuel that gushes out.

As I near the legless male vampire he moans and begs me to stop. He apologizes, and he promises to help me. He says he'll do anything I ask if I don't kill him. And as I splash the diesel fuel over him, I feel a little remorse.

Only a little.

I light the puddle of fuel near him, burning my hand a little in the process, and watch as the fire grows and grows, until it finally makes its way over to where he is. I can't watch anymore at that point.

I have to sing to myself to block out his moans and screams of pain as he flops around, trying in vain to put out the fire. I fill the cup again and repeat the process with Rachelle. She is less vocal. Then the other female, who barely whimpers.

And then I stumble away from the burning bodies. I bend and wretch from the smell of burning flesh. Then I get my bearings and hurry as fast as I can manage in the direction everyone went.

***

It is slow going, but I stumble along in pain and keep my ears tuned for any sounds. Eventually I find them when I hear Miranda screaming at her sister.

I come around the building and find Jess, Teresa, and Bernice standing in an opening between buildings. Fifty feet away, down the narrow place between the buildings and hemmed in by a dead end, are Marissa and Miranda.

“Hey,” I say, stepping up beside Jess and putting a hand on her shoulder so I could lean on her. “What is this?”
“Chased ‘em down the rabbit hole.” Bernice says flatly.
“We were just debating how best to deal with them.” Teresa adds.

The two girls are swearing at each other in some of the most profane language I have ever in my entire existence heard.

“You’re such a prissy little bitch.” Marissa says.
“Whore!” Miranda shoots back.
“This is your fault, asshole.”

Marissa is pulling on Miranda’s hair. No, seriously. And then chunks come out. Miranda punches her, then claws at her face. I would laugh at the absurdity of it if I wasn’t in so much pain.

“Maybe we just let them sort of finish each other off.” I suggest.
“Guess so.” Jess agrees. “How’d the disposal go?”
“Taken care of.” I tell her.

There are sirens in the distance, and they are starting to get nearer. Someone saw the fires, maybe? Or an alarm was set off somewhere.

“We should probably take care of this and get out of here.” Jess says, now noticing the sirens.
“How do you want to play this?” Bernice asks me.

Marissa grabs Miranda by the head and pulls her forward and *bites her ear*. Off. She actually spits a chunk of Miranda’s ear out!

“Oh you bitch!” Miranda shouts.

It is a blur. Miranda grabs Marissa and they tumble to the ground. I

hear bones cracking as things get more intense. There are blood splatters.

And when it is done, Miranda is no longer twitching on the ground. She moans slightly, but I don't even hear her breathing anymore. Marissa is standing, smiling down at her sister.

"Hope your bitch-ass burns." Marissa says, and she spits on her.

Marissa's eyes turned up toward us and her mouth curls into a grimace. Apparently she had forgotten we were here, and now she is starting to realize that she will be joining her sister soon.

So there she is, covered in blood--both hers and Miranda's. There are bite marks on her arms, face, and legs. Skin is missing in several locations, and there is a tear in her cheek so severe that I can see teeth through it. Her nose is shoved sideways, like it has been severely broken, and one nostril is ripped completely free from where her nose meets her face.

She lets out a gurgling laugh.

"Well isn't this just the shit?" she says.

She raises her hands and in a weary gesture motions us toward her in a sort of 'bring it' way.

"It didn't have to be this way, Marissa." I tell her.
"Bite me."
"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it looks like someone already has." Teresa says. "Might want to have that looked at by a doctor."
"Go to hell, Bambi."
"Bambi?" Teresa asks. She swivels her head toward me, a confused look on her face.

I shrug. Who knows what Marissa is thinking. Ever. I highly doubt that anyone will ever again have a chance to know what she is thinking after tonight.

Bernice takes her sickle and steps forward. Jess goes with her. Marissa swings her arms up and waves her hands at the sky in a very odd stance. She lets out a yelp, then lunges toward Bernice.

It is over quickly.

Several swipes of the sickle and Marissa is down. Bernice… takes her apart, piece by piece. I gag, but keep watching. It is important for me to know this is done, that *she* is done.

And then the police arrive.

Tuesday, September 30

The officers guarding me in the hospital are actually fairly pleasant. They smile and make small talk, which I didn't expect, considering the fact that they are ostensibly there to keep me from escaping.

Bernice, Jessica, and Teresa are all in jail. Once the doctors stitched my belly up, I feel okay. Sore, but okay.

I could use some blood, honestly.

The FBI agents came around this morning. After giving them Agent Donnely's name they went away. An hour later they came back and we went through a quick interview, most of which seemed very superficial.

The news this morning has pictures--highly edited because of graphic content--of Marissa and Miranda, labeling them as the masterminds of the nationwide massacres. Clearing my name.

I'm getting out of here later today. Amusingly, they won't let me go without an adult to take responsibility for me. Celeste is coming. She's going to try the stepmother bit again, which I think will work--mostly because the FBI is really pushing for my release.

Jess and Bernice are getting out soon, probably before I do. Teresa must wait for her parents to come and pick her up. Like me, they won't release her without an adult.

I'm not sure what to think of everything. Every time I close my eyes all I can see are the burning corpses of the vampires I set on fire. That, or the bloody pieces of Marissa lying around on the ground. Or Celeste's father. Or Paolo's head.

So much carnage.

So many lives that didn't have to end.

So much pain and despair.

The worst part is, there will always be another Marissa, another Alejandro, another Joanna and Julius. But at least Celeste is getting the VI going again. The world needs an agency to fight back against the monsters among us.

Thursday, October 9

I sit on the hood of the car that I bought with the funds Celeste transferred to me from the VI bank accounts. She says it was the least she could do, considering they took so much from me before. I stare out into the starry sky and think about the future. What do I do now?

“Did you hear about the explosion?” Jess asks. She slides up onto the hood, next to me.
“The one in Canada?” I ask. “Yeah.”
“Not a terrorist attack, and not an industrial accident. The news all has it wrong.”
“Let me guess, a barghest camp?” I ask.
“Yes. Celeste got word last night.”
“That’s good.”

We sit in silence for a while. The stars are amazing, and I can’t help feeling a little small as I stare at them.

“Teresa and her family are heading home tomorrow, I guess.” Jess says.
“I know.”

She kneads her hands together and looks at me for a minute. A tear rolls out of her eye, and she smiles.

“So, will you be going too?” she asks.

“I think I might.” I tell her. “I don’t think I can stay here for now. Maybe I can come back someday, but I need to get away for a while.”

“Oh.” She says. She sniffles. “Thought you might.”

“Wanna come?” I ask.

Her face registers shock, then it fades. She smiles and nods, but then shakes her head.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.” she says, her voice wavering.

“I suck at driving. I could use you.” I tell her, trying to make her smile.

“Ha. I don’t think Teresa would like that very well.” She shakes her head again. “It’s okay. But… I love you, Brynne, and I know you want to be with her, so I want you to be–”

“Jess,” I interrupt her. “I’m not going with Teresa.”

“You’re not?” she asks.

I reach up and touch her hand, feeling the tingle of electricity between us. I slide mine into hers, and her mouth falls open as her eyes blink quickly at me.

“I have thought about this a lot, and I don’t want to be with her. I did at one time, but we’re different people now. She’s different. And that’s okay.”

“Oh.”

“I care about her, but I’m not in love with her.”

“Uh… um…?”

“So she isn’t the one I want to be with.”

“Oh.”

“She isn’t the one…”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Am I sure of this?

Yes, I am.

I think I've known for a long time, too.

I never felt I belonged anywhere until I met Jessica. Never with my family, even before meeting Alejandro and becoming a vampire. Not in more than a century since. Never.

But one day I looked up and saw her smile--oh that heart melting smile. I was scared and lonely, and I felt so out of place at the school. So much like a new kid usually does, I suppose. But she reached out to me. She took me around and showed me the school, she made me feel welcome and safe, even though it caused her to be late for her first class. She even invited me to sit with her at lunch. I think I fell in love with her that very first day, even if I wouldn’t let myself admit it for so very long afterward.

Of course I’m sure of this.

“She isn’t the one I love.”
“Oh.” Jess mumbles, her eyes never leaving me. “Then, um, wh-who–”
“Shut up, Jess.” I say.

She gives me a confused look with those deep, gorgeous eyes she has, and I smile. She smiles in return, and I stroke my hand along her cheek, then I lean forward and press my lips against hers.

It is bliss.

“I love you, Jessica Sloan.” I say.
“I love you, Brynne Campbell.” She replies.

THE END

Thank you for reading *Malicious*. If you enjoyed this book, please post a review on amazon, recommend it on twitter, or review it on your favorite social media site.

About the Author

Jennie Taylor grew up in a small rural town, always dreaming of being a writer. She enjoys listening to music, writing, and spending time with her lovely wife. While she's not enjoying her creative pursuits, she can be found watching Korean dramas and American Idol, or playing vintage video games. She also has a very cute hamster, Emmie, who nibbles on her fingers too much. Look for more novels coming soon!

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